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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

GEORGE RYGA: SUFFERING HUMANITY

BY

KATHLEEN M. BOULTER

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND
RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING 1990

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GEORGE RYGA: SUFFERING HUMANITY

SUBMITTED BY KATHLEEN M. BOULTER

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

J.V. DeFelice

PROFESSOR J.V. DEFELICE

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DATE: 30 MARCH 1990

Abstract

George Ryga has profoundly affected the contemporary, international and Canadian artistic scene by soaring to prominence - or as some might think notoriety - as a poet, novelist, radio and television script writer, dramatist, lyricist and song writer - all in just two decades. Ryga's wide-ranging creative abilities, accompanied by social vision made him something of a phenomenon in this country.

Certain ethical themes recur in all Ryga's work. He was genuinely concerned with the suffering of all humanity. Ryga, through travels and personal contact, encountered the despair endured by people struggling with their disadvantages. His primary interest was with the men and women who have existence and responsibility foisted upon them. Ryga demonstrated concern for those who suffered disastrous consequences of dehumanized societies. Ryga's characters are often the displaced, suffering in an alien society. They are the outcasts, human beings suffering from poverty, neglect, or discrimination resulting from race, religion, or sex. As in his plays, Indian and The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, they may be mistreated, or completely ignored, creating in them frustration and bitterness that often in turn leads to violence. Ryga's writings are concerned with groups he considered to be socially oppressed. In his play, Sunrise On Sarah, he examines a woman's soul as she struggles to find fulfilment within society's pressures to conform. Ryga's novels, The Hungry Hills and Ballad Of A Stonepicker, present graphic pictures of the bitterness of the rural people. Poverty-stricken, forced to live in isolation, they struggled to eke out a bare existence from the barren prairies. In his novels and plays, Ryga asks his audience to examine the values of the individuals and compare them with those of the society which has alienated them. He possesses a deep dissatisfaction with society and attempts to change it by encouraging the audience to consider the alternatives.

Ryga supplies the questions; he leaves the answers to us.

A study of his background and some of his more prominent work will abundantly testify to the fact that this man, so powerful in his own generation, is worthy of the acclaim he has received as a controversial writer of social realism.

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Chapter One

Biographical Introduction

George Ryga's choices, dramatic subject and technique were clearly influenced and shaped by his early life and experience. Much of his writing reflects Communist leanings influenced by his family's oppressive poverty and his feeling of hopelessness. There was not only a lack of money and educational facilities, but more important, a communal feeling of despair, a perception by the farmers that their destiny would be mired in the age old "class struggle" between rich and poor. As we delve into his background, it will become apparent that the circumstances of his early years were to become so integrated into his whole being that they became in fact the crucible out of which his work originally came, and continued thus throughout his literary career.

His parents, Maria and George Ryga, immigrated to Canada from the Western Ukraine. They settled on a 160-acre raw homestead north of the town of Athabasca. The community, called Deep Creek, was less than a decade old. It consisted mostly of Eastern European immigrants with little money or education attempting to eke out a living from marginal farm land. Their son, George, was brought into the world on July 27, 1932 by a midwife, as the Athabasca Hospital was a good day's journey away. Young George experienced the full rigours of the Depression and, initially, a total lack of educational facilities.[1] Ryga later recalled,

> It was very primitive...A lot of impressions of how people live when reduced to bare essentials still persist in my mind. My father didn't know when the thirties ended and the good times began. He worked this farm for 32 years...value ...with all equipment and the farmhouse, at the time of his retirement was $8,000....[2]

Classes were held in a barn at the time George was born, which was replaced by a log cabin by the time he reached

school age. His first teacher, a woman of Anglo-Saxon heritage, had a nervous breakdown and was replaced by someone with the same ethnic background as the homesteaders. She had more empathy for the children, their pranks, and in the beginning, the serious resistance to education by the parents.

> My mother was totally illiterate, but she learned to write her name...to count up the number of bushels the farm was producing...it wasn't a welcome skill, it was a very difficult thing and they all resisted it. My father didn't...because he had at least a basic education in the old country and he was supportive of the teacher, he even went around the community to check up on people who didn't attend classes.[3]

The young George Ryga went to school until the age of twelve. No formal high school existed, so government-sponsored Alberta Correspondence School courses were arranged. There was also the government-operated travelling library that lent him books.

> So most of the reading I ever did was done at that period of my life...historical books, fiction, do-it-yourself manuals...was my first contact with Shelley and Byron and just learning there was such a thing as history. Coming into contact with literature and becoming aware of its dignity, beauty and severe discipline was probably the kind of challenge I needed at the time to begin to confront myself and to construct things on my own.[4]

George could not master the sciences as there were no laboratory facilities. However, repairing the farm equipment gave him a practical knowledge of engines, machinery and tools. This experience also helped him, in later years, to perform his carpentry and remodelling work at his home in Summerland, B.C. He approached all work, including his writing, with the unflagging persistence of a manual labourer.

> ...a very unhappy realization began to dawn on me that I had to get out of here: otherwise I would become what the climate...geography and spatial thing dictated that I should be...obstacles... severe...there wasn't that kind of money...

to be had....[5]

> Looking back, it's terrifying to me to think that I might have died there - spiritually. None of my peers went beyond grade six in school.[6]

Ryga began writing in his early teens. His poems and occasional short stories emerged out of a profound personal depression. The northern Alberta farming community of Deep Creek, then as now, was

> ...essentially Third World. It didn't relate to anything and gave me a sense of displacement and alienation and feeling that there wasn't really a hell of a lot going for me or ahead of me...a fearful despair of ending up doing nothing useful for anybody or for myself....[7]

Here, perhaps, is a hint of the origins of Ryga's class consciousness, of the value some of his work has placed on "the land".

> I first became aware of struggle being a component of human survival as a young person listening to folk tales, or what passed as folk tales, but were really metaphors of a people in constant social struggle. Some were spoken, some sung, some appeared as ballads. There were stories that probably date back to the days of Genghis Khan coming through the region...stories of my grandfather... a Kulak. When my grandmother died, the family took her remains through the ritual of a Church funeral...grandfather...an atheist was so outraged by this that he knocked the priest into the grave and proceeded to bury both...one dead and one alive. On my mother's side we look upon almost ...landless, nameless people who drifted across the countryside. When the Second War ended, all the records of who they were, where they came from were destroyed. My mother had to go and beg somebody: 'will you authenticate that I am such and such a person, born on such a date?' Well the person doesn't know, but for $5.00 will give you a document. My mother was passive. She survived, not by struggle, but by finding cracks in the wall through which you can slip by, and this was the foundation of my spiritual values.[8]

An important effect on the rhythms of speech and music in Ryga's plays resulted from growing up with Ukrainian as his first language. Ryga commented,

> ...in Canada, we use language as a form of understatement. If two men meet on the street the basic information conveyed is...'How do you feel?' 'I feel fine'. If you met a (Ukrainian) on the road, and said, 'How's everything?'...you would be assailed by...all kinds of things...then there'd be laughter. Well, growing up like that, I didn't have reservations about opening up - the kind of thing I get criticized for. I run into a review that says part of a play was melodramatic in its overstatement. What was intended was the volume of information that goes out at very rapid speed.[9]
>
> The language took the form of the land - uncompromising, hard, defiant. The long months of winter isolation made the desire for human contact a constant ache. The thoughts were no longer leisurely ...sang your songs...turned your language this way and that until it sat more comfortably in your mouth. 'A mite chilly' became 'it's goddam cold today'. If you were born in the early thirties in ...'ethnic' community...faced with a series of... language absolutes which were to have profound influence on your life and thoughts. People around you...spoke with the accent and phraseology you yourself used. But the ticket seller at the railway station, the social worker, the postmaster... town constable, all spoke with an English accent. So when you heard an English accent, you heard state or civic authority. There was 'them' and there was 'us'. In their presence, you were guarded, tight-lipped and careful. Collective speech patterns...more rapid the further north you went... consonants dropping or muted. All that was a prelude. Every dramatist in Canada had his or her prelude.[10]

The first literary opportunity afforded to the young Ryga came from a newspaper-woman in Athabasca. Evelyn Rogers uncritically published the poems he submitted. The absence of any criticism in this solitary experience had a beneficial effect on his learning the craft and developing his mind.

> I could entertain any thought that came into my mind as I read, partly because there was nobody more learned around.[11]

Ryga describes his work opportunities as a lad:

> ...there was a bit of peripheral lumbering for two or three months of the year when civic projects came up, like repairing the road or building a bridge, so those of us who were of employ-

> able age, which was fourteen and up, were vying for these jobs with the Indian lads from the reservation and we were struggling exactly the same way to get out of the ghetto as they were from the reserve. So that was the interconnection between the thoughts of the white community and the thoughts of the Indian community. We were pretty much on the same level; the only differences were cultural and linguistic.[12]

During his lunch breaks, young Ryga continued his writing. The earliest influence that contained criticism also led to Ryga's escape from the little world into which he was born. This came from E. Nancy Thompson, his English instructor:

> ...George Ryga...enrolled in the Alberta Correspondence School for much of his high school education...was a student of mine in Grade XI English in the school year 1948-49....George won first in the essay contest, second in the short story contest, and was awarded a hundred dollar scholarship to attend the Banff School Of Fine Arts...prize essay "Smoke" may be found in the 1949 Correspondent. What strikes one about this essay, written by a boy of sixteen,...mature vocabulary, skilfully used,...maturity of outlook, as he reflected on and described the life of settlers of the Athabasca district in the 1930's and early 40's: the pioneer clearing of bushland...depression years...war years. Professor J. T. Jones of the Department of English, University of Alberta, took an interest in George and his obvious talent. In 1953...George...showed me some of his poems - rather remarkable lyrics, based on the rhythm and rhyme scheme of Tennyson's "In Memorium"...[13]

Previously, Ryga did not know that the Banff School of Fine Arts scholarship existed:

> At school I did fairly well with composition. I submitted a short story, a poem and an essay. I don't remember the first two, but the essay was called "Smoke", written when I was clearing land.[14]
>
> I heard nothing for months, then one night we were listening to the C.B.C. news on a battery radio. The first item was that I had won...the scholarship to Banff.[15]
>
> I won the top prize and a girl named Dorothy Campbell the second,...entitled us to a scholarship ...sponsored by the I.O.D.E. Interesting that

> both of us were dropouts.[16]
>
> I took a cream cheque for $13.40...my father bought me a new jacket, and I went off to Banff.[17]
>
> My reaction? I was scared...it was the first time in my life I had been more than twenty miles from home.[18]

The Banff School was then, as it is largely today, an institution attended by students of more affluent families. Socially, Ryga was uncomfortable at Banff. His speech and clothes differed from the others attending the Banff School Of Fine Arts. Also, his lack of formal education had made him unaware of European drama. Dr. E. P. Conklin, a drama expert from the University of Texas, while lecturing at Banff, "first brought theatre and Chekhov"[19] to his attention. The artistry and sensibility of the Russian writer left a lasting impression on Ryga's work.

During the summer of 1950, Ryga returned to Banff a second time, after winning another creative writing prize for poetry. It was during this time that he decided to become a writer. An American commercial writer named Gerald Lawrence gave him direct tutelage for six weeks:

> Of all the catalysts working for me, Jerry was probably the most significant. He worked me very hard...I stayed with him in his cottage and the workday began at seven in the morning and didn't end until midnight every night. I had to keep the same pace he did and it was brutal: the criticism, the pressures that were put on...he began to put together the elements of my background and he knew that unless he punched everything he could within those six weeks I'd probably vanish and wouldn't surface again...he said...'I didn't honestly think you'd make it... all the elements were stacked against you'.[20]

Ryga's association with the Banff School Of Fine Arts came to an abrupt halt that same summer. His poem against the Korean War (circulated about the town of Banff as a broadsheet) antagonized the Imperial Order Of Daughters Of The Empire, sponsors of his scholarship.[21] The poem

is not available. However, one may speculate as to the contents based upon the reaction it precipitated. The futility of war, leaving misery and suffering for many and aiding a small ruling class, was a topic that would resurface throughout his life. Given that the I.O.D.E. presumably sided with the "ruling class", they would not tolerate any questioning of the ethics of war. Ryga had his first professional taste of the consequences involved with questioning those in power. Finally, the I.O.D.E. withdrew Ryga's scholarship when he failed to show any remorse for his actions.

Given his lack of financial and ideological support Ryga returned home in the fall of 1950, working on the farm, in construction and in lumber camps. He suffered an industrial accident during this period, losing the three middle fingers of his right hand. It was serious, but he could still write and could still play his banjo. Another person, having experienced these acute disappointments so close in succession, might never have ventured forth again, but not George Ryga! Determined to express himself by pursuing his career as a writer, he left the farm.

Ryga moved to Edmonton and obtained a job as a copywriter at a commercial radio station. Within a year, he was producing a Sunday evening poetry show called Reverie. The next three years were spent working in Edmonton at the station, providing ample opportunity to sharpen his professional skills. His first public success came at the end of this period. Like his Banff School experience, it was very controversial. This involved programming the customary Armistice show, November, 1954, designed to perpetuate war nostalgia. Ryga turned it around by taking lines from Flanders Fields, adding military music and using in counterpoint the works of prominent pacifist poets. It was a powerful program condeming war, but it violently divided the listening public.[22]

> We took some of the work of Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams, and Robert Service and we used one line from Flanders Fields, then a poem by Williams...then "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow", followed by another poem, then "between the crosses row on row". This was all carefully researched including the tremendous amount of anti-war music that was beginning to bloom at the time. Show was aired...Remembrance Day. This was so totally different from the usual Remembrance Day programming that the show was cancelled. But...six months later the predecessors of the Board of Broadcast Governors were visiting radio stations in Western Canada to see what type of original material they were turning out. This was the show that was played for...an example of the creativity of Edmonton radio. They got their plaudits out of it, even though I lost the show.[23]

Although the Druggists' Association, sponsors of the program, were impressed and stood by Ryga, the management at the station were most displeased, telling him that "exciting" people was not their business. Ryga was asked to resign.[24]

Ryga went to England to work in May of 1955. His first job was as a literary critic with the B.B.C. He also spent some time in Scotland where he discovered some remarkable early drafts of Robert Burns' poems in unpublished manuscripts. His attraction to Burns came from their obvious biographical parallels. Robert Burns' father was a struggling farmer and Burns himself exhausted his health and energy trying to keep a marginal farm going as a tenant. The literary influences are more profound, especially the conversion of folk-songs and traditional airs into great poetry. In Scotland, while examining the early manuscripts, Ryga traced Burns' use of folklore and popular culture. Ryga made the discovery that literature may spring from a swearword or a crude peasant expression:

> I wanted to explore the countryside of Robert Burns to try to understand better how a writer evolved language. Burns [and] Sevchenko, a Ukrainian poet...did...same thing with language:

> they elevated it...took it from a...colloquial form into a new art form.[25]

The link with Burns points forward to Ryga's search for a folklore of the Canadian common man. The tone is sentimental, but even in his earliest novels and short stories this "is offset by the realism in his descriptions of marginal existence and the characterization of those conditioned by it".[26] Ryga stated that he always felt a strong affinity with Robert Burns based on a perception of parallel political contexts, since

> ...the English dominance of Scotland, and Burns' contribution in retaining a semblance of language and around that language developing a rallying point for Scotland's national aspirations, were translatable directly to...Canadian experience.[27]

While in Scotland, Ryga was contacted by the Canadian Peace Movement and was asked to attend, as a Canadian delegate, the World Peace Assembly in Helsinki. The conference proved to be a key experience in his life. It was there he met some of his literary heroes. He developed contact with,

> people from Ghana with a very no-nonsense attitude to literature...art...folk forms like dance. They were reinterpreting everything and it was like watching a laboratory. It was all part of a larger process. Years later this influenced me in judgments I had to make about my own country, when we caught up with our anti-colonial struggle ...that's what we are in today, at least in the early stages of it.[28]

Ryga had been a Communist from his early years as the son of a poor homesteader to an adult with lack of funds for education. He saw the great inequality among people brought about (in his view) by the inequity of wealth distribution. Nevertheless, his trip behind the Iron Curtain opened his eyes to the shortcomings and inefficiency of the Communist system. He noticed how ineffectual and futile the great minds of the time seemed in their approach to the serious existing crises - the Cold War and

the nuclear build-up. The widespread bureaucracy in the so-called classless society disturbed him immensely. His formal break with the Communist party came with the brutal suppression of the Hungarian revolution by the governments of Hungary and Russia in 1956.

Ryga returned to Edmonton in 1956 and took whatever jobs he could, but was often out of work. The work that was available seemed stultifying and boring. He suffered from headaches and consumed quantities of tranquilizers to keep going. One day, after dumping the tranquilizers down the office sink, he cried, "...nothing we do is of any value!" That was the end of that particular job, and the end of the headaches.[29] From then on, he worked at night to make a living and spent his daytime hours writing a series of novels, completing six in quick succession over the next six years:

> During the writing of the six novels I had some peculiar study habits. One of them was reading through everything written by Dostoyevsky. I couldn't tell you why, it was one of those needs I had at the time. For a period during this time I was working at night in a hotel. I set up the typewriter...the actual time needed to keep my job was two or three hours...I would type...in between that and work I would be reading Dostoyevsky. What effect this had on the novels I just can't tell...I felt the necessity for burn-off, a kind of balance between output and input and Dostoyevsky seemed to meet that need...kept me going...coming out of writing all those novels, I didn't feel exhausted or depleted...[30]

Ryga was realizing that to become a writer was a slow and painful undertaking. He began to concentrate on writing in a more disciplined way:

> I had done a lot of aimless or disconnected study up to that time. Now, I had to hone in and start producing results. If I was to survive as a writer in this society there were two choices...very easy to become a hack writer...other option...a deeper commitment.[31]

> I began to tackle the problems of style and content, craft, trying to utilize all the sort of free-forming things that were happening to me into

> a concise and usable form. I started writing short stories. At that time the only market for that type of thing was C.B.C....Most of my stuff ended up in Winnipeg for regional broadcast. They were buying up more and more of my stories...pushing them into places like farm shows, so that between a discussion on new biological advances on Hereford cattle there would be a story of mine. One thing it did for me was to teach me discipline. The C.B.C. would come to me and say, 'now we've got seven minutes open for a story and we don't want to edit'. I got so that I could pull in a story to within ten seconds if I had to...$10.00 - $20.00 I'd get for a story hardly paid for the paper used.[32]

A volume of verse titled Song Of My Hands And Other Poems was published in August 1956. The introduction was an indication of the ideas he would portray in the future:

> Traveller, when you see my country
> Where prairie wind and sun range free;
> Remember those who found and built her
> Think of what she yet will be!....[33]

The country is a common theme throughout all of Ryga's writing. In 1959, Ryga published a collection of poems in Wales, titled These Songs I Sing. His theme again restated his firm conviction that a true Canadian is not a member of the Anglo-Saxon establishment, but an immigrant with earthy peasant values and a heritage of political struggle. City is contrasted with country; commerce and industrialization are set against the flesh and blood of poverty and toil. The imagery stresses the dignity of labour and the character-altering effect of material deprivation that leads to social revolution:

> ...'The name of Johnny Canuck / Is Mike Wasylyk'... it is the hands with hammer and spades, not politicians with decrees or historic ceremonies, that built the country...'Bunyan hands' have been hardened by the unremitting fight for survival against harsh nature, and from the 'stony fields of parched desire' eventually there will come 'thunder / In the rising sun'....[34]

George met Norma while he was working in England for the B.B.C. When they returned to Edmonton in 1960, George

adopted Norma's two daughters, Lesley, aged 10, and Tanya, aged 8. The Rygas had two sons: Campbell, born in 1961, and Sergei, born in 1963. Norma was originally from Cape Breton, but had lived in England previously. Ryga said:

> She saw a great deal of theatre there, but it was a part of her life I didn't know...didn't share.[35]

George became discouraged at his slow progress and almost abandoned writing for more lucrative work. Norma convinced him to stay with it, saying "No, man should be happy in his work".[36] She obtained a job at the University of Alberta to ease their financial burden. George raised the children, made the meals, and bashed out his novels and poems on scrap paper covered on one side with chemical formulas, paper that Norma scrounged from her job. Ryga's office was the kitchen table and his muse the steady chugging of the wringer washer, where he stood for hours pushing through diapers and composing entire works in his head. The day they were able to purchase an automatic washer, he feared "he would never write again".[37]

Ryga had sent in a short story entitled "Pine Tree Ghetto" to C.B.C. radio in Winnipeg. It was returned with this criticism:

> ...you are allowing your social convictions to interfere with your ability as a writer, and you're going downhill, boy.[38]

Ryga rewrote the story as a play, titled Indian, and sent it to the attention of the C.B.C. producers of a television show in Toronto called Quest.

> ...about forty scripts per day were coming in to "Quest" from all over the world. So the chances of having a script even read were very remote. It was...a fluke that Daryl [Quest producer] happened to get hold of this script. He read it, and he wired me, and within three or four days he was casting. Before they started shooting they came to Edmonton to check conditions and see if the situation described in the play was for real...spent two days and became convinced it

> was. When it was aired it had a fantastic reaction. Right across the country.[39]

C.B.C. Television aired Indian 25 November 1962. It proved to be a breakthrough for Ryga. The play, with its portrayal of Indian despair, pointed an accusing finger at audiences across Canada.

> ...suddenly I found new possibilities open to me ...Maclean's magazine picked [Indian] up and published it. Then came more television plays... from then on there was a good market open to me at C.B.C. [40]

Following the production of Indian, Two Soldiers was produced by Daryl Duke of Quest in October 1963. This production, a character and mood piece about two members of Canada's peacetime army on their way home on leave, was unique in C.B.C. Television dramas at the time, in that it was the first to be video-taped entirely on location. The taping was done in August 1963 near Kleinburg, Ontario.[41]

The Tulip Garden, a play written by Ryga during the 1960's, concerned a woman dying from cancer. When the late John Drainie took a leading role in the play, he knew he had terminal cancer himself. Ryga commented:

> It was a very moving experience for me because in the story Drainie's wife had cancer and had been chopped up...and they had given her no dignity. When I heard about [Drainie's] passing it came as one of those shocks you get as a writer...sometimes the people who work with you know more than you do about what they're doing. And they suffer more than you do...the thing a writer is faced with and which is difficult to reconcile. This has happened time and again.[42]

Radio drama was a dominant influence on Ryga's work in the early days, and continued to remain so throughout his career.

> ...Although I have written more for radio than any other form of dramatic expression, this work...was influenced by only two radio drama directors. In some ways, I...credit them for shaping much of what I subsequently have done in theatre, film, television and in musical collaborations...most directly taught me discipline, and both the

> limitations...endless possibilities of spinning out the dramatic moment in theatre. I never personally met Rupert Kaplan, who directed on a series called "Shoestring Theatre" out of Montreal ...arid, stripped down radio drama, of half-hour length, overseen by a master craftsman. To this day, a hallmark of my work in radio was his production of Indian with the soaring rages of Percy Rodriquez in the title role. Kaplan and I never corresponded. He proposed his commissions by telephone...his notes...the same way...gruff, never off the point...absolutely understandable. I would be asked for corrections only once...they were to be in the mail the following morning. He taught me the discipline of writing through the night. Esse Liungh was in many respects an opposite of Rupert Kaplan. Esse was a friend I saw many times while working with him. Flexible and gentle, he stimulated what was already within the dramatist...encouraged drama from other sources and classes of society than those abundantly represented...possessed that rare love of poetry in theatre without which there is no ignition of wonder...had love for the languages of the country and supported their evolution. Deprived of theatre in my generation by geographic and social location, radio drama became theatre. Nothing else could have filled that void...the human voice became all-ranging over the spectrum of loneliness, alienation, crisis and salvation.[43]

The Ryga family moved to Summerland, B.C., in the late sixties. They purchased an old home, built in 1904, halfway up Giant's Head mountain, on an acre of land overlooking Okanagan Lake. The property was surrounded by orchards and much of Ryga's leisure hours were spent helping neighbors care for their fruit trees. An old concrete swimming pool on the property cracked one cold winter, shortly after they moved in. Innovative planning found a use for it, however. During this period, the Rygas operated a "coffee house" in Penticton, complete with live musicians. It was customary after closing time for many of the group to move to Ryga's home. While he enjoyed the camaraderie, the revelry soon began to intrude on Ryga's writing time. The solution was to build a roof over the old pool, converting it into a "hootenanny house". This became the favorite haunt of the

late, late crowd. Ryga wrote in various areas of their home, including a basement office, an old cabin in the yard, but he still preferred the kitchen table, next to the peanut butter jar.[44] Ryga recalls that during the early 1960's,

> We went through some extremely difficult times. The work that one does must be socially useful, but you pay a price for this...I don't rest extremely easy with the fact that at this moment Norma has a chronic eye problem, knowing in some ways it was due to inadequate nutrition and care at that time. These are the demons one lives with. Disaster is...on the landscape.[45]

Ryga, self-exiled from the usual haunts of Canadian writers - Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver, commented:

> I work best on the prairies. There are stones around if you look for them...if I were surrounded by other writers I might begin to copy their style. I feel comfortable right here....[46]

Full of myths, songs, stories and indignation enough for several writers, Ryga turned out short stories, novels and several radio and television plays before turning to the stage form in 1964. By this time, the main elements of his approach, his thought process, and his style were already evident. Ryga wrote the music to his own lyrics. He habitually worked with natives and other actors of various social strata, many untrained in any formal sense. He had a keen ear for rhythm and the varied dialects of his actors. There was folklore, both spoken and sung, incorporated within his writing. One of Ryga's earliest poems rejects the educational process that might have exposed him to European or American playwrights in coherent way during his formative years, denying ever having been "Harnessed / To the glib shit machine / of academic mediocrity".[47] From a stylistic perspective, Ryga was working in isolation because any established model borrowed from elsewhere would impose a foreign pattern on the portrayal of native experience. Banff had exposed Ryga to Chekhov; his own

reading introduced him to Maxim Gorky and Edward Albee, who provided sources for some of his dramas. His early work was clearly building from the ground up. He was developing his own theatrical style. Since he had a disrespect for arbitrary adherence to rules and forms, Ryga developed a pattern in which events and anecdotes from the past and present overlap. Thus he produced "cumulative mosaic", rather than a progressive plot.[48] Ryga believed a director must have ultimate control over the production. A play will not have harmony unless each new director can reinterpret the play to fit the times. Here as elsewhere in the theatre, "...the ego thing often gets in the way." But, regarding any production, "...the only relevant question is; does it work?"[49]

Every waking moment was spent assimilating new material. Even the most trivial thought would be stored away in some isolated, neurological compartment until it could be resurrected to make a point. Ryga spent six months preparing for "A Child In Prison Camp", the story of a Japanese Canadian interned during World War II, but the actual writing took only four days:

> I ate Japanese food, studied Japanese architecture and culture...assumed the whole pattern of Japanese living...I had to do it in order to write the play....[50]

Ryga attempted to create a composite figure for all the oppressed or dispossessed in his treatment of one theme which would appeal to all Canadians. Thus Ryga explored a more general concept, based on his perception that the mentality of the Anglo-Saxon establishment ignores differences in history, language or ethnic backgrounds.

> The bum, the Indian, the Newfoundlander, they're all interchangeable....[51]

This theme reappeared in a novel, stage play, television script and a proposed film scenario. He continually reworked this material over a five-year period, attempting

to give it the widest possible public exposure in various literary forms. Originally titled Man Alive, it was produced in 1966 as a play commissioned by C.B.C. Television to mark the centennial of Confederation. Thematic statements set the frustrations and hardships of the past against the promise of modern technology, and in particular the potential for global communication. Scenes were bleak, stressing the deprivation and potential for despair, thus making it impossible for anyone to ignore the lives of others. There were references to the "essential pain" of past history, and the "great joy of man released". It covered a period of over fifteen years, ranging from realistic "back-breaking work on a potato-farm, a lock-out at a lumber-mill, conversation with an old Indian", through memory fragments, including streets where soldiers from all wars paraded. Since settings were suggestive and props minimal, transitions were marked by lighting and music to set new moods. Details were deliberately left out so that Canadians in all walks of life could substitute their own experiences. Ryga claimed Man Alive as "his most significant work for television".[52]

In its transition to the stage, the title was changed from Man Alive to Nothing But A Man. Ryga's play premiered at the Walterdale Playhouse, Edmonton, in March 1967. It was directed by Marjorie Knowler and starred John Rivet. The figure of Duke Radomsky is based on a real person drawn from Ryga's memories and goes back to his earliest poetry. He had a northern Alberta farmer in mind, Mike Yartus, who had been both a Bolshevik and a soldier in the Czar's Imperial Guard. In Ryga's poem, These Songs I Sing, (1959) this "giant of a man" had taken on the attributes that characterize the hero of Nothing But A Man. The significance of the central figure, Duke Radomsky, is spelled out when he introduces himself, "Duke, as in brother to the King", and the lowly status of immigrant labour, "Radomsky,

which...was a kind of badge a man wore long ago, to dig holes and bash down steel with...." His search is both for his roots and for the future. Throughout the play the question that pursues him is "...who am I?...What's in it for me?...." Duke's opening monologue informs the audience that "...we have much in common, you and I descendants of the hard-rock-men-pick-axe swingers and stubble-hoppers of the plains...." All space is assumed to be the same, "...what place is this...What difference? They're all windy towns...all dry as shingles in the wind ..."[53] Ryga refers to Duke as a

> Canadian Everyman...a study of a man's journey through his life from the moment he recognizes he is a human right through until he realizes he is both a success and a failure...the play is wide open to interpretation. In many areas even I am at a loss. I watched a rehearsal and found there is about sixty percent of it that I almost can't understand...that's exactly how I want it....[54]

One of Ryga's first stage plays, Just An Ordinary Person, a title confusingly similiar to his earlier play, Nothing But A Man, was televised in 1967. It was based on a short story by Gorky, a classic writer of the Russian Revolution, but makes use as well of a poem from Ryga's Song Of My Hands And Other Poems, written in 1956. This poem concerned the death of the Spanish poet and dramatist Garcia Lorca during the Spanish Civil War (1936). The Ukrainian Canadian commented:

> Who would not be moved by the words of Spanish patriot-poet Federico Garcia Lorca, hurling back the taunt that he is mad, before his life is cut short by the fascist firing squad:
>
> "Mad! Yes, mad as the flowers
> In the sunlit field;
> Or the stars in our Spanish night,
> Who weep with me at what has come to pass...
> If I am mad,
> Then mad is our sobbing earth
> That whispers, "Free me,
> So I may dream with you,

My glorious children!"
Mad? Then so were the souls
Of our fathers,
Whose lovely books you burned
In the village court.
Mad as my poems,
Whose verse froze upon your lips
In fear.
When they hushed with sword and flame
The songs of free men.
I go, but let my madness live
In the hungry hills,
And not in the sunless dungeons."[55]

Ryga and Lorca resemble one another in both content and technique. Both are concerned with the lives of the dispossessed: Lorca with gypsies, Ryga with labourers and ethnic groups, both with the problems of individual integrity. Both have adapted the "ballad's method of narration", which focuses on specific incidents "without telling the whole story", and the ballad's use of emotional similarity. The feeling of a scene is conveyed by referring to interesting incidents "not otherwise related to the main action".[56] Both writers include actual songs within their plays.

Karl Wylie played the Ordinary Person, or the poet's conscious. Edward Brooke played the poet, who commented:

> Ryga is a poet, and working with his lines you are faced with having to deal with lyrical writing, something very unusual in modern theatre. An actor immediately feels that he is working with a writer who is in tune with the modern world.[57]

In Just An Ordinary Person, the play is interesting technically for its attempt to bridge the gap between audience and stage. A poet is on the road to success, with university lectures, meetings with publishers, and contracts for plays. At a public reading, where this poet is singing ballads about the death of Garcia Lorca, he is interrupted by a man from the audience. Characterized successively as an immigrant, a labourer, the poet's alter

ego, and Everyman, this audience member then issues the poet a challenge:

> ...you are a poet that's become pretty famous, and I, just an ordinary person...who asks you now, for what reason do you write a book?[58]

In this play, Ryga has the Ordinary Person remind us that in the present world, the poet has a huge responsibility toward the common man. The poet's challenge is to help the common man to realize his strengths and to articulate beliefs that will inspire "rebellion of spirit". However, instead of this, Ryga stresses that when poets need to "bear men's souls aloft on wings of fire, they crouch whimpering".[59]

In order to make history rather than merely record it, Ryga stresses poets must be prepared for self-sacrifice. The Ordinary Person here is a figure symbolic of the working class, cut off from his roots by industrialization of the cities and towns, reduced to a fixed pattern of existence by mechanization, "cannon fodder" for war that is presented as the logical extension of capitalism:

> ...the person sheds his outer clothing, revealing a tattered military uniform...A black light illuminates invisible wounds on his face and hands and blood on his clothing....[60]

During the late 1960's, the youth culture came into focus in North America. The young people were in conflict with their parents and establishment thinking. The result of this rebellion against authority was that many left home, ending up in "communes", or just travelling the highways. The Ryga home in Summerland became known as a "safe haven" and was invariably filled with alienated young people. Norma and George spent many hours in discussion with the young people. From these discussions arose the play that Ryga wrote next, titled <u>Grass And Wild Strawberries</u>.[61]

> ...I think it is both tragic and beautiful that young people have had to take drastic measures

> to express to their parents the fact that they're individuals...young people in conflict with their times...they don't search for conflict...it exists in their geography. They have ideas at sixteen and seventeen...about peace and war...the structure of the world powers,...a belief which comes in contact with the world...part of the human condition is to struggle...There are many things in our society which have to be examined and changed.[62]

The most novel feature of the production of Grass And Wild Strawberries was the use of one of Canada's top acid-rock groups, "The Collectors", on stage. They played music composed by themselves and sung lyrics written by Ryga. Some of the music from the play, composed by the group, was subsequently sold in record stores all over North America and titled Grass And Wild Strawberries. Ryga compared the role of the group to that of "the chorus in a Greek tragedy, except they become emotionally involved, so are even more integral".[63] Ryga's poetry appealed to the "Collectors". Howie Vickers, lead vocalist of the "Collectors", remarked:

> Ryga has a beautiful rhythmic sense of words, of the rhythm within words themselves. One time when we were up at his place working on the songs with him, as I was singing the song, he was yelling out changes he wanted made so that the words could accommodate the phrasing before I got to it. Claire (Lawrence) was writing it down as he was yelling out. He's fast.[64]

Grass And Wild Strawberries was produced at the Vancouver Playhouse in April 1969. In this play, Ryga expanded further his theatrical devices. He instructed all the cast to enter through the audience, and invited the onlookers to join in the closing dance. Songs and dances were used more in this play than in Ryga's earlier plays. This was an original and ambitious experiment in form which attempted to combine the spoken word, music, choreography, film and slide projections in a unique multi-

media blend. Ryga exposed the audience to as many sensory perceptions as possible in this play. The "sound level was, indeed, high, the modern music distorted to create the new sound".[65] The film images and still projection mixed with, and played counterpoint to, the live action on stage. The set was constructed to accommodate the color film which included live and animated sequences. The screen at the rear of the stage served as a focal point for the film, with a big plastic spiderweb upstage. "Strobe lights flashed, while disembodied voices thundered from the rear of the hall".[66] The production was aimed at attracting a young audience formerly unfamiliar with the Vancouver Playhouse.

The play was primarily an attempt to understand the difference in attitudes between the generations. Part of the conflict in the play is between a young dropout, Allen, and his old Marxist Uncle, who was involved in the struggles of the thirties. Allen is living in a commune with young pregnant Susan, and continually comments he wants to be "free", while being financially supported by his mother, a member of the establishment from which he tries to escape. The play ends with a close-up of Allen on a screen, whose face "shows his determination for a reckoning with society for making him an outcast... Group dance through song, engaging audience to join them".

> Don't turn away from me
> I am what I am
> And I shall be what I must be
> Don't turn away from me
> For we each must do
> The thing we do....[67]

Ryga believes that the play is a true study of the conflict of the generations. Establishment norms were under scrutiny and examination in this play.

Ryga had been commissioned by former Artistic Directors at the Vancouver Playhouse to write plays. Malcolm

Black commissioned The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, and Joy Coghill commissioned Grass And Wild Strawberries. These two social dramas of acute relevance to Canadian society brought money and reputation to the Vancouver Playhouse. Ryga began working on a play that dealt with the problems of political violence in an industrialized society with David Gardner, Artistic Director of the Vancouver Playhouse in January, 1970. This play became Captives Of The Faceless Drummer.[68]

Ryga made these comments on the background to the play:

> The first concern of the play was to explore the altered state of love in our society. What are the new avenues? Have human beings been altered as sexual, philosophical lovers? That's where it began. Then came the F.L.Q. kidnappings in Quebec. That, plus my realization that the War Measures Act had altered things, that now we were back to life by legislation, in a way that was pretty total. These things all started to fall into place, and bigger questions started to emerge. The first draft was written while the Polish food riots were going on. There was the realization that we had to live with political terrorism as a way of life, whether we liked it or not. This was the surface of the iceberg, and underneath it was the original question, has human love altered. I set it in the future - so that I would have more liberty to work from an assumed perspective. It was a very invigorating, very exciting experience. It took me as a playwright into a new plateau of sensitivity which I'd not had to use before.[69]

Thus it was evident that the play was conceived, commissioned and sketched out before the events of the Quebec crisis, but in its final form, it was certainly influenced by them.

The contract of commission was delayed by the Vancouver Playhouse administration until late November, 1970. Ryga became concerned that his play would not meet the deadline for its production when the Executive

Committee of the Board attempted to get Artistic Director Gardner to defer the play on the evidence of the first draft.[70] Gardner, who had been instructed to select a season of safe plays that would guarantee box-office return, was reluctant to tell the Board the play would make good theatre until the second draft arrived. The Board would not take the financial risk of waiting.[71] David Gardner was quoted in the Vancouver Sun as stating:

> I must reconsider...not on the basis of the first draft which the committee had read, but on the basis of the next, which is due in a few days...the decision must remain an artistic one and not a decision out of fear alone or the pressure of a committee which does not have the professional qualifications to judge artistic potential...owe it to Ryga to see more finished version...The theatre must be allowed to examine these important topics. The question of political violence is discussed regularly in the press and on television...why should the theatre be excluded from examining such things.[72]

The Board immediately suspended Gardner as Artistic Director.

Neither The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe nor Grass And Wild Strawberries was presented as a completed script. Each was developed in exactly the same manner as Captives Of The Faceless Drummer. At the same stage at which the first two were accepted, the latter was rejected. The main issue at the Vancouver Playhouse and "similarly funded organizations across the country was the strained relationships between amateur boards and the professional artists they hired and fired at will. Boards claimed the ultimate financial responsibility".[73]

Like many previous disputes, this might never have come to the notice of the public, but for strong-worded press reseases by Ryga.

> A small, persistent group of people at the executive committee level has obstructed and harassed this item of theatre from its very

> inception. They have attempted censorship and intimidation of the artistic judgment of some of the finest and most talented theatre people. This type of mentality betrays the theatre-going public, denies them access to living theatre, and has no place in the administration of a theatre company largely supported by the tax-payer.[74]

> ...it becomes impossible to create original drama. I can't function under these dictates. My terms of commission did not include having to answer to any authority except that of the artistic director.[75]

> The days of original and exciting Canadian drama at the [Vancouver] Playhouse are at an end. A publicly supported theatre cannot and must not become a privileged playground for a small minority of a community and expect to remain in good health. All reason rebels against the thought.[76]

In January, 1971, the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre released all rights of the play to Ryga, accompanied by a cheque for final payment. Renee Paris, Ryga's agent declared:

> they have done more in terms of money than what the contract required, but less in terms of morals....[77]

> [directors] are playing games with the best play that Ryga has written...because they are afraid of the relevance of the play to the nation. It concerns people involved in a politically violent situation - and the directors don't want to hear about activities of this kind.[78]

When the Board of Directors of the Vancouver Playhouse banned Ryga's play which they had commissioned, and fired an Artistic Director whom they had chosen, they demonstrated their unsuitability for their power over the arts, Peter Hay declared.

> All this would (not) have been...relevant if Ryga's play were not about just this type of 'faceless drummer' in the background...beat the tune...but never want to be held responsible.[79]

After its withdrawal from the Vancouver Playhouse, Captives Of The Faceless Drummer was staged in the

simplest possible manner with a minimum of theatrical equipment at the Vancouver Art Gallery on April 16, 1971. The play was directed by Hagan Beggs, with lyrics and music by Ryga. There it ran to capacity houses for twelve performances. Actors' Equity stretched its usual "showcase permit" from six to twelve days. A "showcase permit" is a special dispensation that permits the actors to work for nothing. They must not charge admission.[80] An offering box, placed at the door, provided an average of thirty cents each, an offer of services, or in the case of a fisherman, a large salmon. This was a "down to earth" people's theatre, with committed actors whose dedication was derived from their deep feelings and beliefs that what they were doing would help in social reform.

On February 14, 1972, the Toronto St. Lawrence Centre mounted a production at the small Townhall Theatre, adding to the controversy by having members hand out copies of the F.L.Q. manifesto. On July 10, 1972, it was produced at the Lennoxville Festival in Quebec.[81]

Theatre can use words, music and dance to achieve a combined impact denied any of them separately, an impact which is also beyond the power of film. They meet on a level on which Ryga has always felt comfortable. The use of these other arts to fortify the emotional impact of an otherwise wordy, didactic play was the solution found by Ryga for Captives Of The Faceless Drummer. The chorus is used in various ways in this play: breaking into particular roles, student, worker, businessman: giving out statistics; illustrating the emotions of the principal characters; or even responding to the action like an onstage audience. Songs interrupt basic situations with reminders of reality. The form of this play is essentially a bitter argument between a kidnapped Canadian diplomat and his tough captor. Harry is the culivated diplomat, who is

kidnapped as hostage for a number of imprisoned terrorists. The captor, known only as The Commander, is an uneducated revolutionary. Mutually trapped in the hide-out, the two men strip each other intellectually and morally. The outside world is represented by the multi-purpose chorus and Harry's wife, mistress and best friend. As they talk, scenes from memory and imagination are played out. There is almost continuous sound and action. The balance between the emotional and rational elements becomes acute. Harry's prison represents the spiritual captivity in which both the captor and hostage find themselves. "Constrictions of the cell are defined by lights", rather than walls. Other characters who exist only in Harry's memory are "illuminated by spotlighting outside the cell area and are often themselves separated by invisible walls".[82] Adrienne, the wife, personifies the "liberal do-gooders", while Jenny, the mistress, is "victimized innocence". Fritz, the doctor-friend, is the "scared realist" who goes by the conventional rule-book. The Commander, the only one who seems to know who he is, is shot at the play's end. As Harry walks away with his rescuers, the Commander's death-screams issue from Harry's mouth, illustrating to the audience the point that "society, by its lethargy and indifference, pays for its indifference by the violence of its victims".[83] Ryga sees society as usually to blame for the evil in the world, because group opinions and actions tend to be ignorant and hypocritical. In Captives Of The Faceless Drummer, Ryga portrays social cowardice and indifference most vividly. "Ryga takes the cliches of class struggle and gives them an actuality, a context, a humanity".[84] The playwright is searching for the truth. In the end, both protagonists are condemned: one for "the violence with which he tries to bring about change", and the other for "the violence with which he defends the status quo".[85]

The controversial rejection by the Vancouver Playhouse of his play, Captives Of The Faceless Drummer, left Ryga discouraged about the opportunities for Canadian artists to create relevant material. He commented:

> There is not enough original drama done in Canada in any medium. Too much is imported for the stage. If playwrights are going to stay in Canada and work for theatre here they will have to be subsidized. We are not going to do it on bank overdrafts.[86]

> Canadian culture is a one-way street. While most of our entertainment comes in from abroad, very little goes out. In a week in Hollywood, I made as much money as I have in years in Canada.[87]

Ryga worked in the U.S.A. periodically to support himself and his family, but he refused to pay income tax to the U.S.A., since the tax went to support the war in Vietnam, which he opposed. His earnings were transferred to Canada, so that he could pay his tax to the Canadian government.[88]

Ryga's first teaching job was at the University of B.C., in 1971. According to Ryga, no amount of formal writing education alone ever makes a writer. The successful writer is usually a "sensitive person with good physical stamina" so he does not exhaust easily, an "inquiring person with a good critical facility".

> You can't survive solely as a novelist or a script writer or a poet and that's uniquely Canadian. You have to be able to function in all areas of writing.[89]

In 1972, Ryga taught a playwriting course at the Banff School Of Fine Arts for the summer session. He noted again, as he had some twenty years before, that the Banff Centre attracted, to a great extent, the upper middle class candidate for courses.

> This is when most kids in the lower class or working families have to find summer jobs. People like Bruno Gerussi came from a small mining town. It was by a fluke I heard of the scholarship [to Banff]. It doesn't mean I wouldn't have emerged...it definitely helped.[90]

The need for careful encouragement of very talented new writers is something of which Ryga was acutely aware. Some years ago, a fourteen-year-old Indian girl in B.C. sent him some of her poetry and he was impressed with the writing. As he believed a good poet can also be a good playwright, he corresponded with the girl for two years before losing touch with her. "I don't know if she is alive or dead or if she lost interest in writing. It still haunts me". His suggestion for developing playwrights in Canada is that an apprentice course of about a three year period be offered, "with stipends for the students", as they should not need to feel the insecurity of having no money to continue their studying. He does not think financial support is adequately handled in Canada, since requisites for a Canada Council grant include "...good running record and good references. What about a guy from Great Slave Lake with his High School teachers as references? What chance has he got?" Ryga believes that the ambition of every playwright is to publish and be produced, but in Canada support of the emerging native playwright is often left to chance.[91]

In 1973, Ryga assumed a summer school post as a creative writing instructor at the Banff School Of Fine Arts. His play, Portrait Of Angelica, was performed during the Banff Arts Festival in August. The play, which takes place in Mexico, concerns a Canadian who is confronted with the abundant poverty of that land. In the town of Santa Angelica, a young aspiring author spends his days writing endless letters to his mother back in Canada. These letters describe the life in the little Mexican town through the eyes of the author. The characters exist in their own right at the same time as they are "elements of the writer's consciousness".[92] The summer of 1973 was a stormy one for Ryga. Earlier, he had threatened to remove his play. Ryga had been informed

that two Indian boys had been expelled from school, on charges of possible use and possession of drugs. Ryga withdrew his threat when the director of the Banff Centre, Dr. David Leighton, agreed to set up a review board to study the situation.[93] Ryga accused the administration of practising racial and economic descrimination.

> Concern over the maintenance of the public image takes precedence over anything else here. The Centre has to be tasteful, upper middle-class, totally self-contained - and useless, sterile...no longer a place for the development of Canadian culture. Its directors are unlive to the times and out of touch with a nation-wide movement to create truly Canadian theatre and art generally.[94]

Ryga vowed he would never work at the Banff Centre again.

In late 1972, Ryga went to Germany on a Canada Council grant where he researched and wrote the play titled Paracelsus. The play was based on an actual historical figure, a Swiss-German physicist and alchemist in the 16th century. It was written on a large scale, requiring a big cast. Paracelsus had its world premiere in Athens in the Greek language in 1975. However, it was not produced in Canada until 1986. John Juliani directed Ryga's play at Expo's World Festival in Vancouver. Ryga believed that Paracelsus provided the more obvious type of image for the values by which we should live. Ryga found a parallel between the linguistic problems encountered in Canada and those of Paracelsus, who used a "derivative of German that was isolated in Switzerland" to write his medical books. Ryga discovered that to translate the statements of Paracelsus into "Western-Canadian English" was not that complicated a problem - because he felt he was translating the kind of "incompleteness of speech that we have here".[95]

> Essentially the man was a revolutionary spirit. He was reacting to...the brutality of medicine as it was practised at the time, to the new promises of science that were coming over the horizon. He was the father of scientific

> inquiry...a man with dignity of spirit and that promise of something that is out of reach. He was unflinching in pursuit of it, and that brings the marvelous realization that no matter where we are, we can do better. I think every playwright has to write a Paracelsus...as a way of asking, 'what...are you really writing for?'[96]

In the 1970's, Ryga again painted a picture of the isolation and deprivation as experienced by the early settlers whose hands had cleared fields and built the cities of Canada. This thought was expressed in two choral works specifically designated for youth. Twelve Ravens For The Sun was a collaboration with Mikas Theodorakis. It was an attempt to translate Theodorakis' success in composing for popular festivals and public places into a Canadian content. The twelve cantos represent "freedom's cry". They move from songs of the exploited gold miners of 1885, and Chinese coolies, to the modern truck driver who is "driven as I'm driving to trade my health for speed and cargo"; through references to the hunger marches of the 1930's, ending with the demands in a marching song:

> We, the people, are coming on
> Two by two and five by five
> Ten by a thousand
> And a million strong
> Wake up the streets and the mountain meadows
> For now is the time to come alive!
> ...we the people, ask for a society based on human needs rather than the machinery of profit
> ...for the protection of our culture, history and languages so we may grow into equal members of the community of nations.[97]

In A Feast Of Thunder, the movements are aimed to express Ryga's sense that the "source of Canada's myth is the climate", uniting the cycle of human life with that of the seasons.

> During my most formative years I was having to cope directly with the climate in our Canadian landscape. Growing up on a farm, you realize ...There was no shelter against the seasons. If you made a mistake...you ceased to be. So there was a kind of austerity, a starkness...

> One got closer to some elemental truths. We have a vanishing landscape. Something out of our past has to be recorded that we carry with us...redesign ourselves for the future...in mind and in spirit.[98]

Commissioned for the National Schevchenko Musical Ensemble, it was presented at Toronto's Massey Hall in June, 1973. Morris Surdin, who composed the music, described the piece as "a stage work of symphonic proportions bringing together many elements of music...from classical...to jazz...." The merging of folk songs and traditional dance tunes with rock orchestration and electric guitars, reflected the theme "...we become like the country we live in", as the immigrant's traditional perspective derived from their European roots would mould to a New World's in time. Ryga hoped to encourage the fusing of cultures that would evoke a unity of Canadian people:

> Canadian folklore, which is the base of all my work, does not have a deep tradition of optimism. Using this theme...simple and universal, I can perhaps contribute to the rising tide of optimism I see in Canada.[99]

But, despite its success, A Feast Of Thunder was limited to ethnic audiences, by the specifically Ukrainian context.

In 1976, The Okanagan Mainline Regional Arts council presented "Okanagan Image", performances of original works by Okanagan artists. Ryga's play, Ploughmen Of The Glacier, was part of this group and played to audiences throughout the Okanagan valley with great success. The play was very well received at a performance in Princeton, B.C., (close to Copper Mountain) by the many miners in the audience. Mainstage theatre in Canada shunned the play. However, a Montreal-based company toured Germany, Austria, and Switzerland with a production in the fall of 1985. In Germany, a radio version was popular, winning two awards.[100] There was minimal stage setting, none of the complex lighting effects and multi-media presentation that had characterized all of Ryga's major works, so the content of

the play came across very clearly to the common people. For Ryga, it was "an entry into a new kind of experiment in theatre".[101]

Volcanic Brown is a pick-and-shovel prospector who discovered and named Copper Mountain, near Princeton, B.C. As a man with a dream of Volcanic City, the place he would build from his prospecting riches as a monument to himself, he represents the "single-minded egoistic ambition that destroys everything in its search for riches". He engages in verbal conflict with an early B.C. newspaper man, Lowery, who represents the "cultural values and social conscience" that are his opposite.[102] Lowery treasures the bits of education he has managed to amass as jealously as Volcanic Brown treasures the giant nuggets he dreams he finds. The pair exist in Ryga's terms as "two halves of the same coin", with stage directions stressing "they are almost look alikes",[103] old, decrepit, physically decaying. The action is divided in two, with each half reflecting the other in a circular pattern of variation and repetition. The setting is a timeless limbo intended to heighten the elemental loneliness of the characters. The play presents existence as an eternal combat between these complementary halves of the human psyche. Conflict is two-fold, the universal love-hate relationship of the primitive and intellectual as well as the struggle of both against their inability to change the world, each other, or themselves. Ryga restricted his drama to dialogue, making fullest use of the power of verbal images. He left the ending open in order to encourage the audience to participate by relating the mythic elements to their own experience. Ploughmen Of The Glacier is an important work because

> it re-emphasizes ... Ryga is a poet of great power. Many of his images are built on poetry's starkness and breathlessness as in Volcanic's most idyllic moments. '...An' the aspen leaves

in the wind...kind of a sweet water sound in a in a big garden I never been to myself.'[104]

From 1976 on, Ryga became increasingly involved with setting up small community theatre groups. He joined the board of a company planned for New Westminster, which was to be the first of "a new grid of theatres to be established, which focus on Canadian playwrights and Canadian themes,"[105] and gave readings to raise funds to turn a former Masonic hall into a theatre. He also designed scripts specifically for the local touring companies that might act as a seed-bed for the alternative theatre he envisaged. Ryga was impressed with Edmonton's Theatre Network in 1975, when he saw them perform Two Miles Off, based on life in Elnora, Alberta. The company had a desire to focus on regional myths and to deal with current issues. He joined the group for part of its tour of other centres. Theatre Network's idea was to develop a 'network' of regional awareness through creating and performing original regional drama. They hoped to establish a strong regional base, making the connection between heritage and the ways in which contemporary lifestyles have sprung from those myths and legends. As an effort to help the company get started, Ryga wrote Seven Hours To Sundown. The world premiere was held at the Studio Theatre, University Of Alberta campus, in May 1976. Performed by Theatre Network, directed by the company head, Mark Manson, the play's cast included Tanya Ryga, the playwright's daughter.[106]

Originally titled Morality Play, Seven Hours To Sundown demonstrates how the system of contemporary political decision-making takes over the issues themselves until the system achieves its own end, while the real and important initial concerns have been obscured, making people ignore even the idea of integrity. The play, set in a small town in the interior of B.C., is based on a real

incident that happened in Summerland. The play encapsulates the major themes that run through all Ryga's work, including the issues of class, power, and discrimination, and the ways such forces affect the human personality.

Seven Hours To Sundown reflected Ryga's own experience in the campaign for the Summerland Arts Centre. The Century House Hospital, an old concrete building originally constructed by one of the three rancher barons of the Okanagan, was located on a hill overlooking the town of Summerland. Norma and George Ryga led a campaign for the conversion of the building into a cultural centre with training facilities, exhibition and performance spaces for artists, sculptors, musicians and a theatre group. The town council wanted to demolish the building for commercial development. The Rygas partcipated in the whole struggle, getting signatures on petitions, holding meetings, organizing a public demonstration and taking the issues to court. Many concerned citizens pledged work and financial support for the venture. City council promised that the property would be available for the Arts Centre, but asked to have the application delayed until after the elections. After the election, however, the request was denied and the old hospital was demolished.[107]

Instead of a hospital, the building in question in the play is a church. Mayor Kiosk wants to protect his position as Mayor, and his power in the decision-making process. The real issue of the crafts shop becomes secondary to the politics which surrounds the future of the church. The crisis occurs when the local leather craftsman wants to lease the vacant church from the town for a new shop. The Mayor won't let him get it, nursing an old grudge from the time the leather-worker was a liberal teacher and the Mayor a reactionary school trustee. The Mayor has a new grudge also: his daughter has fallen in love with the leatherworker. The leatherworker becomes

wrapped up in politics, when all he really wanted to do was his work. Eventually, both the Mayor and the daughter's lover are implicated in the ambition, cowardice, and pettiness that infect the town. Ryga illustrates that neither the establishment nor the so-called counter-culture is free from secret motives which are barely disguised by the use of noble phrases as freedom, progress, and justice. The play merges flashbacks and memories with present dialogue, impressions and dreams. In dramatic style, the play is reminiscent of Greek tragedy, featuring a musical chorus to open each act. Ryga commented:

> I realized the role of the individual is really minimal...decisions are made en masse...there are tragic elements: individual initiative doesn't work, it doesn't pay off...people get trapped into positions on moral stances; neither side is totally right or wrong.[108]

Ryga wrote a short story titled A Visit From The Pension Lady for the T.V. Newcomers series. This was an episode about the original Ukrainian immigrants' struggle to adjust to life in Canada. Since this was the ninetieth anniversary of the Ukrainian settlement in Canada, this story was appropriate to open the 1981/82 season for Kam Theatre Lab. Ryga adapted the story to a play and retitled it A Letter To My Son. It was commissioned by the Kam Theatre Lab in North Bay, Ontario, and premiered on October 2, 1981. "The play clearly illustrated the multi-faceted contribution of one of our minority cultures to the development of Canada." When broadcast over West German radio in 1982, A Letter To My Son won a "Best Play" award from the German Academy Of Performing Arts.[109]

In 1985, Ryga wrote In The Shadow Of The Vulture. This novel may have been inspired by the report that several Mexican immigrants to the U.S.A. had been abandoned and had subsequently starved to death. Ryga tackles the problem of the illegal entry of immigrants and bluntly discusses how

they are being treated. In this novel, as always, Ryga demonstrates concern for the displaced who are struggling in an alien society.

A great deal of Ryga's recognition came from abroad. His novels have sold better in Russia than anywhere else in the world. One of his plays was translated into Spanish. His plays have been produced virtually everywhere, including China, Mexico, Australia, and Germany. A few years ago, Germany requested a radio play, "and there have been constant requests ever since". The plays were written by Ryga in English and then translated into German. Ryga commented that

> ...I've listened to some of the tapes...and they're really good. In fact some of their interpretations of very regional work that I've written about in this country have been much more interesting and incisive than productions here in the original language.[110]

Ryga had little interest in seeing his plays once the initial production had been staged:

> ...when I finish writing, I block the piece out. I heard a radio drama I wrote in 1966, and I didn't recognize the title or anything. I wash it right out...otherwise there would be too much clutter.[111]

Ryga's plays were often critical of society; consequently, he was forced to depend on Canada's semi-professional theatres, and groups receiving little or no funding, to inaugurate his plays since professional theatres would not take the risk. During a workshop at a conference on theatre held in Edmonton, Ryga admitted that several of his plays had suffered because he had been forced to deal with novice actors and directors, but that this was the price he had to pay since the more "bourgeois" theatres were often hesitant about his work. George Melnyk observed:

> And while these groups, like poorly trained guerrilla bands, lacking experience, money, and power, have made up for their deficiencies

> with enthusiasm, commitment, and self-sacrifice, there can be no question that Ryga's reliance on them has taken its toll![112]

Ryga remarked that the relationships with people in the country's smaller theatres was "far more affectionate than any relationship I had with regional theatres at any point",[113] since the mainstream regional theatres from 1971 on, quietly avoided his work.

Chapter Two
Indian

George Ryga's genuine concern for humanity suffering from poverty, neglect and discrimination impelled him to write his first play. Ryga's play was simply called Indian, for in the plight of Canada's first inhabitants lies excessive drama.

The first play performed by the European newcomers on Canadian soil (The Theatre Of Neptune) was presented in 1605 by members of Champlain's settlement at Port Royal, and included native chieftains in its cast. Their roles were dignified and seemly. Later theatrical productions under the French regime also employed native performers, but as "demons", to be saved by their "enlightened Christian overlords".[1] For over three centuries, the attitude of the whites toward the natives in Canada fell into one of three categories:

> ...the red man is doomed to assimilation by the ...Anglo-Saxons because he is unable to survive in competitive evolution; the white is...trying to do his best to make the death struggle of the primitive as soft as possible.
> ...the Indians are noble savages, children of nature who have prowess, cunning and dignity, yet tend to be ignorant and slothful.
> ...the degenerate white has corrupted the Indian, but it is also an Anglo-Saxon virtue to raise the aboriginal to hitherto unprecedented levels of civilization and salvation, fashioned on the white model.[2]

Although some of these views may still be adhered to, an attitude that is slowly emerging is that the native people must be allowed to retain their own valuable civilization. Ryga's play, Indian, written in 1962, contributes to this new attitude. In his play, Ryga stresses that the white man has aided the destruction of the Indian's civilization, in one way or another. Ryga's play has no solution to offer, but Indian does, however, portray the native problem vividly on stage.

Indian is a short, one-act play that concerns a young Indian laborer who experiences harassment from his white boss, and an Indian Affairs Agent. This hostile confrontation between them is an exploration of the source of all relationships between Indians and his white neighbors. In the vivid description of the hardship and misery recounted by the Indian, he is not there only as the representative of his people, but as an example of all those near or below the poverty line, whatever their ethnic origin. In the forward to Poor People, a collection of ten short stories, plus the play Indian published in 1963, George Ryga wrote:

> I write of the poor people - among which I have lived and worked, here and in other places. The poor people - on whom the success or failure of all great dreams rest.[3]

When Indian was produced on C.B.C. Television 25 November 1962, Ryga's play provoked a varied reaction. Ryga's outspoken views on Canadian culture were making the theatre establishment in this country uneasy. Had it not been for the intervention of a sympathetic producer, Daryl Duke, Ryga realized that

> Indian would have been an unproduced, unknown play relegated to non-life by the self-appointed guardians of dramatic art forms.[4]

As to the inspiration for both the form and the type of relationship presented, Ryga declared:

> From my own perspective, it was a milestone. I was working in a form, in a content...that was very close to me...defiance towards death... I credit a large part of the fact that Indian was written at all, to seeing The Zoo Story on television, and watching how that particular play was constructed. It was the freedom that Albee was exercising in departing from the traditions as then practised, and taking theatre into a kind of arid area, which I found fascinating and which to a great extent I have used ever since. If you remove as much of the framework...flesh and fire that can make style more important than content, it should intensify the interest...on stage.[5]

In Edward Albee's play The Zoo Story two men meet by chance in the park. Jerry challenges Peter's principles, undermining his pride in material possessions, his sense of security and his trust in a stable, ordered social universe. Finally, Jerry provokes Peter into becoming Jerry's killer. In Indian the Agent is challenged by the Indian in a similar way. The Agent's assumptions about society and his position in it are comparable to those of Peter's and shown to be equally empty. The Indian cries out to the Agent:

> I want nothing from you - jus' to talk to me - to know who I am.[6]

At one point, the Indian even incites the Agent to kill him:

> Maybe nobody here to see what happen, but after accident, lots of people come from everywhere. I'm gonna jump on car bumper, and when you drive, I fall off an' you drive over me.[7]

Basically, Indian is a realistic play, in event, dialogue and setting. Yet, the set may also have a symbolic function, "conveying a sense of spiritual emptiness".[8] Indian is set in an environment with overtones of homelessness and rootlessness, in which the Indian is a transient in his own country.

> The coarse texture of the black and white television picture in...'Quest' production was particularly suitable for rendering the harshness of the landscape.[9]

The stage direction requires, as in most of Ryga's plays, an unidentified space:

> ...flat, grey, stark non-country. Diametric lines (telephone poles and wire on one side, with a suggestion of two or three newly driven fence posts on the other) could project vast, empty expanse. Set may have a few representative tufts of scraggy growth in distance - also far and faint horizon. High, fierce white light off stage left to denote sun. Harsh shadows and constant sound of low wind.[10]

The representational details of the set - telephone wires, fence-posts - merely emphasize the void by creating vanishing points that project the "vast, empty expanse".

Ryga sets his play in horizonless distance which can symbolize the Indian's non-life, while at the same time representing his real world in a bare and desolate land where he does exhausting, mindless work, for which he receives below minimum wage. It is this creation of the "realistic and symbolic, simultaneously, in situation and design",[11] that points forward to Ryga's technique in his future plays.

The characterization of the Indian and details of the experience he relates may have a documentary basis, being drawn from Ryga's own experiences. When Ryga, as a boy, recuperated from a bout of pneumonia, he worked beside Cree Indians on his father's farm. Ryga recalls:

> The Indians referred to themselves as "breeds" for somehow they got the notion that mixed blood was superior to the original article. They were transient laborers, gay, naive, open-hearted to the verge of being self-destructive. When they worked their pace was fiendish. So were their excesses - fighting, drinking, gambling and women. Yet they weren't oblivious to the contradictions. I did some haying with a lad named Sammy. One of the arms was dead from disease and should have been amputated for it was obviously poisoning him. He would say: 'If God made all men same, then how come misha, I so poor?' I never saw him after that summer.[12]

> I grew up on the outskirts of a Cree reservation. The demoralization and degradation was about as total as any society can experience anywhere in the world. These people had been worked over by the Church...the Hudson's Bay Co.; there was nothing left.[13]

When Indian was published in Maclean's magazine, 1 December 1962, a photo report on the actors and director who made it for television was included. Daryl Duke, who produced Indian on the "Quest" television series wrote:

> ...what good television plays are...is the most personal kind of professional drama people have ever been able to see. A small picture reaches you in private, scanned into your mind - if its drama really means anything to you - almost the way the picture itself is scanned by the tube... that is what George Ryga's Indian will do.

> Ryga's play strikes straight at the peculiar damnation our kind of world has condemned the Indian to...before we staged the play George McCowan, the director, and Len Birman, who plays the Indian, flew to Edmonton to spend a few days with Ryga at nearby Indian reservations. The things they finally say on the screen about the wordless rage that builds inside a man who has learned by experience that most of the world doesn't recognize his existence are true...for the Indians of Alberta. But they are also true for the other minorities and the other individuals who get the same treatment from the safe and certain majority. Indian won't make you laugh and it won't make you love yourself any better than you do...it will engage the fears and guilts and fantasies that are the stuff real drama works with. We've made television drama a kind of middle class soap opera, the...set a sun lamp bathing the suburban living room in a soft glow of contentment...left no time...for special cases. But this is what a good drama is, what Indian is; a special case.[14]

In Indian, Ryga suggests that the Indian has been deprived of dignity and freedom and employs dramatic strategies designed to give a white audience a taste of this deprivation. When the audience first sees the Indian, he is suffering from the effects of the previous night's drinking spree. The tent which he and other Indians have been living in has been burned down. His nephew, frightened by the Indian's fighting, has fled to the white boss' house. The other two Indians have disappeared. When confronted by his boss, Watson, the Indian either can not or will not offer an explanation for the events of the previous evening. The Indian apparently fits white society's cliches of the "typical Indian", becoming evasive and illogical. This picture of the Indian is one which would be instantly "recognized and accepted by a white audience".[15] In the opening dialogue between the Indian and Watson, the audience identify with Watson, since the Indian does not seem to have any redeeming features. Watson appears to represent socially approved values of fairness, thrift and hard work.

He has paid his Indian laborers money in advance when they complained of hunger. By contrast, the Indians seem to have all the "worst characteristics of the racial stereotypes".[16] The audience's assumptions are confirmed as the Indians are portrayed as lazy (in a whole day the three of them only managed to drive twenty-nine posts); self-destructive (they bought bad whiskey instead of food, fought and burned their tent down in a drunken party); unreliable (the other two Indians vanished in the night without doing what they had been paid for); unprincipled (the Indian has taken the boots from one of his companions to wear himself) and unpredictable. In encouraging these assumptions, Ryga establishes the starting point for his "skilfull audience manipulation".[17]

Watson has plenty to say about "no-good" Indians, as he complains,

> ...you've done two dollars ninety cents worth of work! An' you got ten dollars off me yesterday.[18]

To get his money's worth, Watson threatens to use kidnapping and blackmail.

> I got your kid in the grainery, locked up so he'll keep. You try to run off after your pals, an' I'm gonna take my gun an' shoot a hole that big through the kids head! So what you say, Indian? You gonna work real hard and be a good boy?[19]

Uneasily aware that the Indian may have cause for complaint, however, Watson warns him:

> ...there's a snoop from the Indian Affairs department toolin' around today - checkin' on all you guys workin' off the reserve...you're working for me, so if you got any complaints, you better tell me now. I don't want no belly-achin' to no government guys.[20]

The Indian quietly replies:

> Sure, bossman - I understand. Complaints? Me? What you take me for?[21]

The exhausted Indian attempts to continue pounding in fence posts after Watson leaves. The Agent for the

Department of Indian Affairs arrives. Although he does not understand the Indian's irrational behavior, he is not actively unpleasant or unfair. Attempting humorous banter, the Agent jokes with the Indian about his ill-fitting boots, acquired at a recent poker game. When the Agent questions the Indian concerning his shirt, his answer is,

> I steal that from my brother, when he is sick and dying. He never catch me![22]

The Agent laughs, and because it is a grimly funny line, the audience may laugh also until the Indian snaps:

> You think is funny me steal shirt from my brother when he die?...You think that funny, bossman? I think you lousy bastard!...You think that funny, too?[23]

The Agent becomes resentful, and the audience likewise may be resentful. That shared resentment further contributes to Ryga's attempt to have the audience identify with the Agent. Through threats of violence and actual violence, the Indian prevents the Agent from leaving until the Indian has told the story of his brother's death, the experience which obsesses him, and which seems to him central to his misery.

The Indian does not confine himself to any one of the racial stereotypes. His hostility is not consistent. In the interplay of roles, there is a glimpse of the Indian's agony. At various times he plays different roles. The drunken Indian is only interested in acquiring a bottle of whiskey:

> Then misha, please get me bottle of good, clean Canadian whiskey! I never drink clean whiskey in my life! I give you twenty dollars for bottle! Is deal?[24]

The childlike Indian admires the Agent's car:

> ...Boy, is like pillow on wheels! If I ever have car like that, I never walk again![25]

The submissive Indian is eager to co-operate:

> ...Don't get mad, misha. I sorry for what I say. I got such hurting head, I don't know what I say.[26]

The Agent uses common sense, law and logic in attempts to defend himself, only to discover that these have no validity within the Indian's world. The Agent's arrogance gradually begins to diminish. His offers to help the Indian are merely attempts to buy him off:

> ...I'll give you smoke to make you feel better ...I got nothing against you boy! What's the matter with you?...Look boy...I'll give you anything I can...That whiskey you want - I'll get it for you...won't cost you a cent, I promise.[27]

Ryga begins gradually to expose the Agent with whom the audience has identified, as a betrayer. The Agent's assumption of superiority turns to fear and bewilderment. The Indian, formerly viewed as inferior, gradually becomes dominant as he verbally challenges the Agent.

> ...Look around - what you see?...you fat, me hungry. I got nothin'...and you got money, car. Maybe you are better man than I. But I am not afraid.[28]

At one point, the Indian demands the cigarette the Agent is smoking. The Agent offers the Indian another from his pocket, but the Indian flings the Agent to the ground and takes the lit cigarette by force. When the Agent questions the Indian's behavior, the Indian replies:

> Now you know what is like to be me.[29]

Throughout the play, the Agent is subjected to several examples of the experiences which constitute the Indian's entire life. As their preconceived beliefs are challenged, the perspective of the audience begins to change. The audience is encouraged to empathize with the Indian during the long narrative speeches concerning his past agony. Gradually, they are drawn into the Indian's experience to discover the inner turmoil of the apparently worthless character, giving them a glimpse of understanding into

the plight of the Indian. All this behavior is revealed as springing from the centre of personal despair that is expressed in the Indian's speech:

> ...All Indian's same - nobody. Listen to me sementos...I got no past...nothing...no future ...I nobody...I never been anybody. I not just dead...I never live at all. What is matter? What anything matter, sementos?[30]

The Indian's emphasis on his own anonymity conveys his feelings that he is nobody. This helps to extend the situation beyond the tragedy of a particular man to the tragedy of all the oppressed people. When the Agent demands his name, the Indian evades the question.

> ...Mebbe I forget...Mebbe I got no name at all.[31]

The figure of the Indian represents all of the oppressed, regardless of race or religion. However, the Indian Agent is also nameless, as noted by the Indian:

> How come all that writing on door - that's not your name? Why you not tell truth?[32]

The government Agent symbolizes the faceless bureaucracy through which the establishment functions and profits. The contrast between the deprived and the representatives of a more privileged establishment becomes more obvious to the audience.

In Indian, Ryga introduces a treatment of time throughout the play that will become characteristic of his future writing. Ryga lifts the past into the foreground so that the present and past overlap. The memories are organized into four levels of recall: the recent pasts of the argument with Watson and the previous night's spree, and the more distant pasts of the accident and mercy killing of the Indian's brother. These levels are associated by the coincidence that the brother and one of the Indian's recent workmates were polio victims. The Indian is wearing items of their clothes which identify him with both. There is an obvious resemblance of

Indian's employer, Watson, to the brother's brutal boss. All this produces a sense of circularity, of hopeless recurrence. This circular structure will be developed more fully in future plays.

Certain themes recur in all Ryga's writing. The ideas found in Indian, will be developed at greater length in later plays. This environment, with its overtones of homelessness and rootlessness, is fundamental to all Ryga's works. The Indian is a transient in his own country. His future is leading nowhere. From this follows the equally typical motif of non-identity. The Indian baffles the Agent by claiming three different names. He turns his anonymity into a weapon against the white community which would label him without recognizing him. Attempting to bring the Indian to heel, the Agent says:

> There are laws in this country - nobody escapes the law![33]

That is the Indian's point; that being nobody is the only way of escaping the system of rules imposed by society. Ryga's play draws the audience into the Indian's experience, exploring the despair of a people trapped by an alien concept of justice. White society is portrayed as merely the Indian's prison. Unable to comprehend white justice, which to them is so unfair, the Indians combat the white law with violence. The belief that traditional religion is no help is illustrated when the Indian describes his brother trapped in the well:

> ...An all the time from down there, my brother yell at sky. Jesus Christ - help me! White man leave me here to die! But Jesus Christ not hear my brother.[34]

There is even a vestige of the parent theme as the Indian tells how he cradled his brother:

> ...In my arms I hold him. He was so light, like small boy. I hold him...rock 'im back and forward like this...like mother rock us when we tiny kids. I rock 'im an' I cry.[35]

Then the Indian became a parent to his brother's son after he mercifully killed his brother. Mercy killing has become the only way such deprived people can help each other. Perhaps Ryga's most poignant treatment of love is the Indian's for the brother he mercifully killed:

> ...I get my hands tight on his neck, an' I squeeze an' I squeeze. I know he dead, and I still squeeze an' cry, for everything is gone,...only hunger an' hurt left now.[36]

The Indian's failings are seen as the despair of a degraded and dehumanized people. Ryga illustrates that the source of the crime lies in the white man's refusal to recognize the humanity and hence equality of the Indian. The Indian's final cry of despair demonstrates that the white man is equally "nobody":

> What you call man who has lost his soul? We have name for man like that! You know the name? We call man like that sementos. Remember that name...for you are sementos![37]

By adhering to society's false values, the white man is left without a soul. He has exchanged his soul for the material comforts represented by his car. The Agent, representing the establishment, is brought to realize that his life is an empty shell. The Indian laborer intimidates the man of property because the Indian symbolizes any member of society whose deprivation has left him nothing to lose, nothing but his soul.

The significance of the play, Indian, rests in the audience's ability to translate the Indian's exploitation and struggle for self-respect into the terms of the audience's own experience. This use of a dramatic situation to create confusion between two opinions during which the audience is seduced into taking a position that exposes standard ideals, as empty attitudes, became a central technique in Ryga's later plays.

In Indian, the Indian's cry of despair expresses the situation of all Ryga's poor people, dirt farmers,

itinerant workers and manual laborers; all those who may be exploited by similar insensitive foremen. Ryga's fictional world reflects the conditions of a society of outcasts, the dispossessed and socially oppressed who:

> cry...cry for every goddamned day I've spent ...I cry because...I've lost life itself.[38]

Ryga presents the constant struggle for survival in the isolation of the Canadian countryside as preferable to the exploitive, materialistic life in the city. From Ryga's point of view, it is the socially oppressed who possess dignity and inner value. The stark existence of the laborers, living in poverty, gives them a personal honesty, perhaps due in part to their closeness to nature. The accusation that society clearly avoids the responsibility of the plight of the dispossessed establishes a major theme that Ryga expands extensively in later plays.

In Ryga's plays, the sequence of events become broken by constant flashbacks to remembered incidents of the past, often out of chronological order. Events of past and present overlap producing a cumulative mosiac rather than a progressive plot. The audience sees the whole picture only when the play is completed. Ryga incorporates song, dance, mime and music into his plays. The stage areas are desolate and deserted, with minimal props. The isolation of scenes from past and present is accomplished by effective lighting.

In May 1970, George Ryga commented:

> Indian occupies a special place in my development as a dramatist. It was my first play, and within it I won a freedom in form and content which I felt at the time to be unique in Canadian theatrical and television literature. If our theatre is to be an accurate reflection of our life condition, it can only succeed if it accepts the language...human qualifications of the people to whom and of whom it speaks! Indian emerged out of the soil and wind of a situation in which I was painfully involved.[39]

Chapter Three

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe

Ryga demonstrated concern for those who suffered the consequences of the dehumanization of Canadian society in all his plays, but this is particularly relevant in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe. Ryga explicitly attacks Canadian society by stressing the plight of the Indians when they encounter poverty, neglect and discrimination.

In preparation for the celebration of the Centennial of Confederation in 1967, Ottawa offered subsidies to any theatre producing new Canadian plays. The Artistic Director for the Vancouver Playhouse, Malcolm Black, was intending to produce a season of new Canadian plays. He discovered a short paragraph written by Simma Holt in a Vancouver newspaper. Holt was reporting the murder of an Indian girl whose body had been found in a rooming house in the slum area of the city. This routine clipping was given to George Ryga by Black, and became the idea from which The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe eventually grew. Early in 1967, Ryga submitted an "outline of intention for a stage play"[1] to Joy Coghill, who had just taken over from Black as Artistic Director for the Vancouver Playhouse. Ryga stated this was to be a woman's "...odyssey through hell...in search of her name, her identity...."[2]

This play, which brought Ryga a reputation as a sensitive poetic dramatist, was not based on this one case. The director of The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, George Bloomfield, stresses the fact that Rita Joes happen

> 20 times a year in Vancouver. He and Ryga researched through personal investigation in Indian reserves, and through newspaper clippings of innumerable Indian arrests and deaths.[3]

Ryga commented:

> You know, one can get used to the politics of struggling with people who are going to battle you. But the thing a writer is faced with and which is difficult to reconcile is the fact that

> sometimes the people who work with you know more than you do about what they're doing. It happened...where a woman actually called Rita Joe died in conditions similar to those in the play. I was told about it one year later and it put me out of operation as a writer for about three weeks. I couldn't get back to the typewriter. You know, I thought: what bloody right have I got to do those things to people which life is doing to them anyway. Its kind of a crisis which I still haven't resolved and don't think I ever will.[4]

In The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, Ryga presents a vivid picture of a confused people caught in the conflict arising from having the values of white society imposed on their simple culture. Ryga's play concerns the Indians' frustrations, but these same frustrations are applicable to the drama of the oppressed everywhere. Ryga's play demonstrates the inability of minds to come together since they function in totally different cultures. This is not an isolated problem. The futile groping for a point of contact by both Indian and whites in the play, and the realization that Ryga has drawn a pattern that not only has been repeated many times, but will be repeated many more times, is the terrifying part of the play. Ryga depicts a woman who is deeply, thoroughly oppressed; she is controlled by a society she doesn't understand. Rita Joe has two counts against her: she is Indian, and she is a woman. Throughout Ryga's play, Rita Joe is representative of both of these groups, and her persecution appears to be result of both factors.

Ryga demonstrates that white society is racist. While actually contributing to the loss of the Indians' self-respect and freedom, white society proposes that discrimination is evil and equal rights should be granted to all. Ryga wrote this introduction for the first production of The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe in November 1967:

> The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe is a story of people in conflict, struggling at a disadvantage.

> Canadian Indians have languages that bear little reference to the realities of our lives...As with their languages so with their lives, they become the forgotten people, mutely desiring health and life. This issue is the burning crisis of our time. It is what the Congo, Bolivia, Vietnam are about. People who are forgotten are not forgetting. To overlook them is a dangerous delusion.[5]

In Ryga's opinion, government policies regarding Indians in Canada were formulated one hundred years ago on the premise the Indian was a vanishing race and would eventually cease to be a problem. Ryga observed dryly:

> ...they did not allow for the instinct for survival.[6]

Ryga liked to claim during his early career:

> ...I do very little rewriting. I have a type of mental editing system, know before I start to write it what every scene is going to do.[7]

However, with The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, he went through four successive versions. Each was different, though each dealt with essentially the same material. Each showed Ryga experimenting with a variety of dramatic styles. The rewriting that took place in collaboration with Bloomfield in the latter's Toronto apartment introduced little new material. Rather, they took selective speeches, episodes, concepts from all the different drafts and restructured them. The script contained all the major speeches in the published text, but through succeeding drafts of the play, shifts occurred in function, significance, and in meaning. The idea of the structure was already present in the outline of intention, with its reference to

> ...a dream-nightmare type of movement and mood - played on a series of planes.[8]

Since Ryga's play, in retrospect, marked the birth of modern Canadian English drama, Ryga was in a sense creating

> ...in a cultural vacuum, that still, in fact persists almost a generation later. Brecht once remarked, not altogether ironically, that the vitality of a literary tradition depends on its plagiarism...practically without exception

> Canadian dramatists look to Europe or American models for their structure or stylistic approach.[9]

The script for The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe was a collaboration, Ryga commented:

> ...the play demanded...a powerful emotional commitment from everyone.[10]

Significant contributions that Ryga gratefully acknowledges came from George Bloomfield, the director of the first production.

> The only substantial contributions in resolving scene values and problems of dramatic structure came from George Bloomfield. He steadfastly resisted requests for changes during rehearsal from some cast members troubled by their religious and social perceptions at odds with roles they were playing.[11]

Chief Dan George for example, became disturbed by some of the criticisms to which Ryga's play alluded, particularly the critical stance toward the Catholic Church.

> I am not surprised that some people were hurt by the general condemnation of all organizations which have dealt with Indian people. It would be wrong to infer that all are conniving....[12]

Norbert Vesak's contribution was limited to the choreography, including the dance and fight scenes for the stage version. When the play was mounted as a ballet production, however, the text announced "Norbert Vesak's The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe". This prompted Ryga to publicly label his next play to be staged following the incident as, "not written by Norbert Vesak". (Sunrise On Sarah, 1972)[13] The historic position of Ryga's play The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe and its international success made it a status symbol. Thus, Ryga was placed in the ironic position of having to defend his own title to the play, since others claimed their contribution made the play a success.

Many of the minor roles in the original production were played by Indians, some of whom had no stage experience but identified completely with the dramatic situation.

They had experienced an actual lifetime in the roles they played. At the same time, rehearsal schedules became difficult, as Joy Coghill remembers,

> because they had been arrested off the street, just because they were Indian.[14]

This helped to reinforce the reality of the play for the white members of the cast. Pat Gage, who played Eileen Joe, Rita's sister, went home from rehearsal and cried for hours:

> I feel naked on the stage with this play. I feel raw - all the nerve ends are exposed.[15]

The rest of the cast agreed with her. Frances Hyland, the Toronto actress who played Rita Joe, spent many a sleepless night, so moved was she by the play. It was one of the most challenging roles of her career. Chief Dan George had resented Frances Hyland's playing his daughter because she was a white woman. But during the second week of rehearsal he came to director George Bloomfield and said:

> I think of her as my own daughter. Now, I must be David Joe.[16]

When Rita Joe finally leaves her father, the script simply has him say:

> Good-bye Rita Joe.[17]

But at one rehearsal, Chief Dan, who had become completely engrossed in the situation, continued on in Indian for two minutes. Frances Hyland was overwhelmed and dropped to her knees, caught up in the awesome emotion. George Bloomfield, the director, sensed the development of a closer relationship among the cast members as rehearsals progressed. Bloomfield explained that the play was extremely private, and the cast came to think of The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe as their play. August Schellenberg, whose mother was Indian, and father Swiss, played the role of Jamie Paul in Ryga's play. The actors came to a sequence during the first blocking session in which Chief Dan George as David Joe and Schellenberg as Jamie Paul were arguing

over whether or not Rita Joe should live in the city. Chief Dan George, whom director Bloomfield described as, "the master of the long pause",[18] stared at Schellenberg for close to a minute. Schellenberg stared back at him with great intensity, then ran off stage. Following him, the director questioned his actions. Considerably shaken, the actor explained he forgot he was on stage and found himself reliving an experience with his own grandfather, a Mohawk Indian.

> I was delivering my lines to Chief Dan George, and I saw my grandfather in front of me, I just couldn't say the lines. I had to stop.[19]

The character of David Joe was modelled closely on the personality of Chief Dan George. Ryga had seen Chief Dan George of the Burrard Indian Tribe of British Columbia in a television performance and wrote lines to utilize his particular sensitivity and stage presence. Chief Dan George was sixty-eight years old at the time.

> When I met him, he seemed in every way the tribal father in the white man's impressions of Indian life. He retains a remarkable folk-memory...I appreciate this traditionalism; it's a great thing if it could be incorporated into the mainstream of Canadian life. I would say that my inclusion of the character into the play is really an inclusion of the man.[20]

Since there were fundamental differences between the play's statement and Chief Dan George's convictions, this sense of involvement created a complexity that produced memorable characterization in his performance.

> He is one of the world's great actors...who have emerged out of impossible conditions...it was a very strange and humbling experience because I realized he knew more about the theatre and acting than I would in a whole lifetime. He read his lines...people were just walking out of the room...crying in hallways...that's the kind of thing he does to you because of his background.[21]

There are several passages in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe that reveal Ryga's talent for writing an approximation of

Indian dialect that is capable of immense poetic effect, especially when spoken by Chief Dan George. One such passage occurs as David Joe sadly recalls Rita Joe's last visit to the reserve.

> ...when I was fifteen years old, I leave the reserve to work on a threshing crew. They pay a dollar a day for a good man...an' I was a good strong man. The first time I got work there was a girl about old as I. She'd come out in the yard an' watch the men working. She had eyes that were the biggest I ever seen...like fifty-cent pieces...an' there was always a flock of geese around her. Whenever I see her I feel good. She used to stand an' watch me, an' the geese made a helluva lot of noise. One time I got off my rick an' went to get a drink of water...but I walked close to where she was watching me. She backed away, and then ran from me with the geese chasin' after her, their wings out an' their feet no longer touching the ground. They were white geese. The last time Rita Joe ever come home...I watched her leave...and I seen geese running after Rita Joe the same way...white geese...with their wings out an' their feet no longer touching the ground. And I remembered it all, an' my heart got so heavy I wanted to cry.[22]

David Joe identifies Rita Joe with the girl who runs from the Indian, pursued by the white geese, wild birds that have been tamed and had their wings clipped. The second example is spoken by David Joe to the agitated Jamie Paul. In his grave, dignified voice he offers a vision of the future:

> I once seen a dragonfly breakin' its shell to get its wings. It floated on water an' crawled up on a log where I was sitting. It dug its feet into the log an' then it pulled until the shell burst over its neck...an' slowly its wings slipped out of the shell...like that! (shows with his hands how dragonfly got freedom) Such wings I never seen before...folded like an accordian... so fine, like thin glass an' white in the morning sun. It spread its wings...so slowly...an' then the wings opened an' began to flutter. Just like that - see! Hesitant at first...then stronger... an' then the wings beatin' like that made the dragonfly's body quiver until the shell on its back falls off. An the dragonfly...flew up...up into the white sun...to the green sky...faster an' faster. Higher. Higher![23]

In the visionary description of the geese, as well as in the ambition implied in the symbol of the dragonfly, Ryga expresses ideas that are central to much of his writing: the elusive nature of love, and the search for a true home in the country, which he shows as preferable to the city. Ryga is uncertain what new home the dragonfly (Jamie Paul) will find, or if indeed his escape from the shell (confines of the reservation) is only momentary.

All Ryga's writing concerns groups that are socially oppressed. Rita Joe is an example of this oppression as she appears in court, formally charged with vagrancy, theft, assault and prostitution. The trial scenes are a composite of all her court appearances merged into one. The images do not form a chronological order. Ryga alters the sequence of events so that the play moves freely through time. Rita Joe comes up before the court several times during the course of the play, but all these occasions seem to flow into one. Rita Joe recalls previous experiences of her life. A line of dialogue in the trial becomes part of another scene, the end of which returns to the trial. Transitions are often abrupt. As fragmentary scenes are given to the audience, the relationship between them is often difficult to grasp until the cumulative mosiac has been completed. Similar to other plays, Ryga uses dance and song to help the transition from the harsh reality of the city to Rita's memories of the happiness of her life in the country. As the images and incidents accumulate, Ryga attempts to show that the actual crime with which Rita Joe is charged is that of not being white. The audience may begin to suspect that the magistrate's opinion of Rita may not be based entirely on the facts of the crime of which she is accused, but on her personal characteristics. When the magistrate counsels conformity, he asks Rita Joe to give up that which is most precious to her, the reflections of her own culture.

> You can't walk around in old clothes and running shoes made of canvas...You have to have some money in your pockets and an address where you live. You should fix your hair...perhaps even change your name. And try to tame that accent that sounds like you have a mouthful of sawdust. There is no peace in being extraordinary.[24]

Rita Joe refuses to be assimilated and reformed by the white society that wants to rob her of her dignity.

Many of Ryga's themes that he introduced in earlier novels and plays are expanded in this play. Ryga has presented the struggle for survival in the countryside in Indian, Hungry Hills and Ballad Of A Stonepicker, as preferable to the materialistic life in the city. In The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, Rita Joe perceives the city as the wilderness, and the inhabitants of the city are part of that environment. They are the expressions of the city's hostility. The state of being "lost" is in Rita Joe's mind. Specific instances of Rita Joe being physically lost bring the theme to the foreground. She forgets the street where she has rented a room. She wanders through Vancouver alone at night.

> One time I couldn't find the street where I had a room to sleep in...Forgot my handbag...had no money...An old man with a dog said 'hello', but I couldn't say hello back because I was worried an' my mouth was so sticky I couldn't speak to him.[25]

The Indian woman from the country is overwhelmed by the big city. While this is only one aspect of Rita's being "lost", it is one able to be understood by any white audience member who may then empathize with the Indian's state of being lost. In court, Rita Joe is a lost child without a mother as seen by the magistrate. Her child-like quality suggests that her perception is entirely different from that of the authorities, and that she is lost in the way that a child can be lost in an adult conversation which the child only half understands. At first she attempts to interject

observations, but becomes uneasy when she realizes that she is being excluded, and finally despairs when she is ignored and not understood. The image of the lost child occurs to the magistrate as he tries to understand Rita Joe:

> I remember...I was on holidays...in the Cariboo country...barren land - wild and windblown...I saw this child beside the road...barefooted... she wasn't more than three or four years old... walking towards me beside the road. When I'd passed her, I stopped my car...drove back... I wondered what she could possibly be doing in such a lonely country...when I got back...she had disappeared...this child had your face.[26]

Ryga gives a suggestion here of the appearance of the next generation of Rita Joes with the same unanswered problems. The magistrate exhibits genuine concern for the Indian child, but an inability to rise above the white biases toward the Indian adult.

Rita Joe is at the mercy of the impersonal nature of white society because her culture and previous experience have not provided her with any defense against the state of being alone. She is so accustomed to the interdependence involving both responsibility, and the assurance that she will be cared for, that she assumes that this way of the country applies to the city also. She is hurt and baffled when she finds it is not so. This is demonstrated in one flashback scene where Rita Joe and her sister Eileen are children in the bush picking blueberries when a storm comes up. Fearing they will never find their way home, the children cry out in unison:

> Would you be my mother then?[27]

Rita Joe reminds her sister of the incident as she recalls:

> We walked home through the mud an' icy puddles among the trees...I held you up an' when we got home you were sure you would've died in the bush if it hadn't been for us being together like that.[28]

The Indians find the situation is reversed in the city. Jamie tells Rita Joe:

> ...They don't care for one another here...You got to be smart or have a good job to live like that...I can't live like that...A man don't count for much here.[29]

Rita is put in prison a number of times, but even when she is not in a cell, she is imprisoned. To Rita Joe, the city is a vast jail from which she seems unable to escape:

> I was going home, trying to find the highway... I knew those two were cops the moment I saw them ...I told them to go f...fly a kite...they arrested me...stuffed five dollar bills in my pockets when they had me in the car.[30]
>
> It wasn't true what they said, but nobody'd believe me.[31]

In the incident described, Rita Joe is approached by policemen attempting to acquire evidence against people they suspect to be prostitutes. In court, Rita Joe insists the money was forced upon her. Promiscuity and sexual licence are parts of the racial stereotype of the Indian woman as seen by white society. They are strengthened by the automatic assumption that white society's point of view is the correct one. It is the white policemen's word against an Indian woman's. The magistrate rejects the suggestion that the agents of the law could be at fault:

> Why should they lie, and Rita Joe alone tell the truth?[32]
>
> This is a police statement. Surely you don't think a mistake was made?[33]
>
> ...are you child enough to believe the civilization of which we are part does not understand Rita Joe?[34]

The ritualistic law court, so necessary to white society, merely confuses Rita Joe. Her culture does not require law courts, so she does not understand them. The magistrate, who sees the law court as of primary importance, constantly attempts to keep Rita Joe's attention on the trial. Rita Joe, however, is absorbed in her memories of happier days. These two views are most evident through comments made by Rita Joe and the magistrate. Reflecting the Indian view,

Rita Joe pleads:

> Everything in this room is like ice. How can you stay alive working here? What the hell kind of place is this won't let me go lie down on grass?[35]

To this the magistrate coldly observes:

> This is another place, another time.[36]

Ryga illustrates the injustice of the law process in white society as it is applied to Indians.

> I walk like a stick, tryin' to keep my ass from showin' because I know what they're thinkin'... them bastards.[37]

Rita tries to justify her position:

> ..you got to listen to me and believe me, mister! You got rules here that was made before I was born. I was hungry when I stole something...an' I was hollerin' I was so lonely...I'm so goddamn hungry I'm sick.[38]

Ryga demonstrates a trace of his parent theme when Rita Joe rejects the magistrate's opinion that she is incapable of caring for a child. The magistrate recalls a child he saw on a deserted road.

> ...this child had your face. Could she have been ...your daughter? Children cannot be left like that. It takes money to raise children. There are institutions and people with more money than you.[39]
>
> Don't hide your child! Someone else can be found to raise her if you can't. There are people who would love to take care of it.[40]

Rita Joe vehemently replies to this suggestion,

> Nobody would get my child. I would sooner kill it an' bury it first![41]

Rita Joe wants Jamie Paul to be the father of her child. This one desire that the two share disappears when they realize that Clara Hill has been forced to give her children away. In one of the most sympathetic scenes in the play, Jamie Paul and Rita Joe meet at his room, where they discuss the possibility of having a child.

> You need a good job to have babies in the city. Clara Hill gave both her babies away they say...

> Foster homes, I guess...Clara Hill don't know where her kids are now.[42]

Ryga's most important theme is that of fathers and father figures who betray. It is in Rita Joe's relationship to her father that Ryga makes a profound statement about true and false parents. David Joe is not only Rita's father, but is chief of the tribe, with all the implications of authority. David Joe has been a loving and responsible parent, both to his children and his people. In one of the many flash-backs, Rita Joe begs her father to repeat the often told story of her youth. He protests "You don't want to hear that story again". To which she quickly replies: "It's the best story I ever heard!" So, David Joe again tells of long ago, when Rita Joe was only four and he refused an offer to sell her.

> ...somebody coming to see me...Sandy Collins, who ran the sawmill back of the reserve. He says to me...sell me Rita Joe like she is for a thousand dollars!...lots of money. You got to cut a lot of timber for a thousand dollars. So you see, Rita Joe, you lose me one thousand dollars from big Sandy Collins![43]

The false fathers whom Rita encounters in the city include Father Andrew, the priest; Mr. Homer, the social worker; the magistrate and the tire store boss. Each successive betrayal deepens her despair.

Rita Joe's heritage has been ignored by the educational system. There was no attempt made to preserve the traditions of the Indian people. Her teacher comments:

> Coming from nowhere and going no place! Who am I to change that? I tried to teach you, but your head was in the clouds, and as for your body - well! I wouldn't even think what I know you do! Arguing...always trying to upset me...in grade four...I saw it then...pawing the ground for men like a bitch in heat![44]

The teacher fails to comprehend Rita Joe when the child attempts to express herself:

> The sun is in my skin, Miss Donohue. The leaves

> is red and orange, and the wind stopped blowin' an hour ago.[45]

Rita Joe, described by the teacher as a disruptive influence, is again condemned because she does not conform.

The Church is unable to communicate with Rita Joe as well. In a flashback scene, she returns to her village for a visit. Father Andrew is unable to convey, in words she will understand, any advice that will be of value to her.

> ...It's not easy, is it?...A lot of things are different in the city. It's because here on the reserve...life is simpler. You can be yourself. That's important to remember...be a good girl, Rita Joe.[46]

Later, he visits her in jail, but is of little consolation to her.

> You know how I feel...city is no place for you... nor for me...I've spent my life in the same surroundings as your father! I worry about you. But you're not the woman I expected you to be... your pride...may bar you from heaven.[47]

Rita Joe, like the Indian in Ryga's play, Indian, has lost faith in the white man's God.

> I don't think God hears me here. Nobody hears me now, nobody except cops an' pimps an' bootleggers! They got rules there too...in heaven?[48]

The white man's rules, which she has never understood, seem to be awaiting her in Heaven. Her mind searches frantically for the old Indian faith as she recalls,

> ...I was outside lookin' at the stars - thinkin - when I was a little girl how much bigger the trees were...no clouds, but suddenly there was a light that made the whole sky look like day. I saw animals, moving across the sky...two white horses. A man was takin' them by the halters, and I knew the man was my grandfather.[49]

The magistrate cannot accept her vision of God in the sky and is inclined to agree with the police when they cynically remarked:

> ...You better call this number...it's the airforce. They'll take care of it![50]

In Indian, the Agent personifies the government paternalism. Here, in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, he appears again as Mr. Homer in the Centre. As before, the audience sees his intentions at first as honest and fair. Surely providing basic necessities to people who lack them is a good thing. The failure of what seems to be charitable human nature may puzzle the audience even though through the course of the play they may have accepted the possibility that law, education and religion may be less than adequate. Ryga demonstrates this failure during various scenes in the play. Mr. Homer reveals a patronizing attitude, when he illustrates the Centre's good works.

> ...we do a lot of things for our Indians here in the city at the Centre. Bring 'em in from the cold an' give them food. The rest...well, the rest kinda takes care of itself. When your mother got sick we flew her out...remember that, Rita Joe? And we sent her body back for the funeral... sometimes a man drinks it up an' leaves his wife an' kids and the poor dears come here for help. We give them food an' a place to sleep. Clothes, too...all on a heap on a table...Indian people... get more of a kick diggin' through stuff that's piled up like that.[51]

In his confrontation with Homer, Jamie Paul begins to voice the sad reality of the situation.

> ...don't be bums! Bums need grub an' clothes... ...an' bums is bad for the country, right Mr. Homer?[52]

> Be men! He's got no kids. We're his kids an' he means to keep it that way![53]

> I don't believe nobody...no priest or government. They don't know what its like to...to want an' not have...to stand in line an' nobody sees you![54]

The confrontation ends in a riot. Rita Joe tries desperately to convince Jamie Paul and the other Indians to leave. When they cause havoc by overturning the table of clothing, she attempts to right the table. Homer suddenly vents his pent-up fury on her verbally, and pushes her aside.

> You slut! You breed whore! (Rita Joe recoils.

> With a shriek of frustration, she attacks Mr. Homer)[55]

The police take Jamie Paul away after the riot. His frustration, anger and despair are very similar to Indian's emotions in Indian as Jamie Paul screams at the audience:

> Not jus' a box of cornflakes! When I go in, I want the whole store! That's right - the whole goddamned store![56]

Rita Joe appears before the magistrate. Homer, a white man, testifies that he was violently attacked by the Indian woman, suddenly and without provocation.

> ...I give her some soup an' a sandwich. Then all of a sudden in the middle of a silly argument, she goes haywire...I see her comin' at me. I'll tell you, I was scared! I don't know Indian women that well.[57]

The magistrate's immediate reply is "Assault!"[58] As this is one of the times Ryga's play departs from sequence, the audience sees the court scene before they see what actually happened. The audience hears Homer's testimony against Rita Joe. Ryga shows Rita Joe's assumed guilt according to the testimony of the white man, which is acceptable to the white value system. As in Indian, Ryga creates confusion between two opinions during which the audience is maneuvered into taking a position. They believe Homer's account of the incident and accept the verdict of the white judge. Later, when the actual incident is portrayed on stage, the audience realizes that Rita Joe has been provoked over an extended period of time. Ryga shows that Rita Joe and Jamie Paul have attempted to remain self-sufficient, but have been forced to gradually become dependent on white charity. The frustration and bitterness created in them has gradually led to violence. When the magistrate gives Jamie Paul a sentence of thirty days, Jamie Paul defiantly cries out:

> Gimme back my truth! Teach me who I really am! You've taken that away! Give me back the real me so I can live like a man![59]

The magistrate's reply to Jamie Paul's heartfelt plea is:

> We'll get larger prisons and more police in every town. There is room for social change...but within the framework of institutions...in existence for that purpose![60]

Throughout The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, Ryga's purpose is not to disprove the charges against the Indian in the white society's court of law, but rather

> to demonstrate that regardless of technical guilt or innocence, law designed to protect and perpetuate a particular society is by its very nature unjust to any individual who does not belong to that society.[61]

None of the white institutions in Ryga's play, in the case of law, education, religion or white charity, establish human contact with Rita Joe. Rita Joe is not seen as a person, but as a problem.

In The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, Ryga presents the basic decision confronting all Indians: to cling to and attempt to return to the old ways, or to attempt to become part of white society. David Joe stands for the old ways of family love and sympathy with nature, that he knows no longer assure survival. He sadly realizes:

> If we only fish an' hunt an' cut pulpwood...pick strawberries in the bush...for a hundred years more, we are dead. I know this here...(touchs his breast)[62]

Jamie Paul dreams of mounting an industry for the Indian:

> We can make some money, the berries are good this year. Stop listening to an old priest an' Indian department guys who're working for a pension! We're gonna work an' live like people ...Not afraid all the time.[63]

In complete frustration, Jamie Paul is willing to put aside the patience and wisdom of David Joe and his traditions, for a violent attempt at seizing equality.

In the scene in which the two men confront Rita Joe, each demanding her loyalty, she must make her own decision for her future. David Joe speaks softly, acting on what

he sees as his parental responsibility:

> I come to take Rita Joe home. We got a house an' some work sometime. I live...an' I am afraid... I have not done everything...when I...know that my children are safe...then...it will be all right. For a long time...a very long time... she was in my hands...like that...(cups his hands into shape of a bowl before him) Sweet...tiny... lovin' all the time and wanting love.[64]

Jamie Paul's reply is filled with pent-up anger:

> You don't have to go back, Rita Joe. This is an old man...he has nothing to give...nothin' to say. Go tell it to the white man! They're lookin' for Indians that stay proud even when they hurt...just so long's they don't ask for their rights! They're not listenin' to you, old man! Where are you gonna be when they start bustin' our heads open an' throwing us into jails right across the goddamned country?[65]

Rita Joe is torn with indecision. Although she recognizes her attachment to and involvement in the past, her new role requires her to progress from child to woman, and thus to mother, to choose the way for the best future for her own child. Rita Joe must accept her responsibilities as a mother. Whereas returning to the reservation with David Joe would assure her safety, she realizes there is no future there for her child. She chooses the city. Rita Joe insists on life on her own terms even though this ultimately means her death. The repeated refrain of Ryga's song echoes and re-echoes the longing and bitterness of Rita Joe's unfulfilled life:

> God was gonna have a laugh
> An' gave me a job in the city![66]

An echo of society's self-righteousness comes from one of the men who had just raped Rita Joe. As he rises from her dead body wondering what all the fuss is about, he exclaims:

> Shit...she's dead...we hardly touched her...[67]

Answers are left for the audience to supply, as Ryga makes his final appeal to their conscience.

Peter Hay, editor of Talonbooks, wrote in his introduction to Ryga's play:

> It was the first time that a playwright had used the Vancouver Playhouse to confront its largely middle-class clientele with the reality of Skid Row blocks away. Ryga pointed a finger accusing that audience, the finger is still pointed... Indian protest, Indian land claims and Indian rights are often featured by the media these days. As little as ten years ago there was hardly a whisper. Indians...were only just waking up from a century and a half of oppression. The play did not focus on any particular issue so much as on the whole problem - white man's denial of the Indian's humanity.[68]

Ryga includes in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe an element that will be used increasingly in his future plays; the interlocked song cycle. The songs actually drive the action forward, heighten a mood, or provide a bridge from one mood to the next. The singer, a white woman, sings songs that contrast or complement the emotions of Rita Joe. Ryga, by this means, is able to confront the audience directly with his statement, enabling them to identify with the singer, or with the victim. One of Rita Joe's encounters with the singer, who has a cynical sense of reality, occurs when the singer predicts Jamie Paul's fate.

> Oh can't you see that train roll on
> Gonna kill a man, before it's gone -
> Jamie Paul fell and died
> He had it comin', so it's all right -
> Silver train with wheels on fire![69]

Ryga's stage directions place the singer at stage right:

> ...turned away from the focus of the play. She has all the reactions of a white liberal folklorist with a limited concern and understanding of an ethnic dilemma which she touches in the course of her research and work in compiling and writing folk songs. Her songs and accompaniment appear almost accidental.[70]

The contrast between reality and the ballad of the folksinger is shown at the conclusion of the play as the singer's words are heard in her final song; interrupted

with the simple remark of Rita Joe's sister:

> Oh the singing bird
> Has found its wings
> And its soaring!
> My God, what a sight!
> On the cold fresh wind of morning!
>
> (During the song Eileen Joe steps forward to the audience and as the song ends, says)
>
> When Rita Joe first come to the city - she told me...The cement made her feet hurt. 71

The action in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe is located in many places, including the courtroom, the prison, the welfare centre and the Indian reserve. But the actual stage setting remains constant throughout the play. In the stage directions for his play, Ryga requests

> A circular ramp - beginning at floor level stage left and continuing downward below floor level at stage front, then rising and sweeping along the stage back at two foot elevations to disappear in wings of stage left. This ramp dominates the stage by wrapping the central and forward playing area. A short approach ramp, meeting with the main ramp at stage right, expedites entrances from wings stage right. The Magistrate's chair and representation of court desk are situated at stage right, enclosed within the sweep of the ramp.72

The cyclical nature of the play is represented by the circular form of the ramp with no beginning or end. The play similarly does not have a defined beginning or ending as it is a continuation of the memories of Rita Joe, past and present. She is confined to the city's "maze", symbolized by her entrapment within the ramp. The magistrate's chair remains onstage to suggest that Rita Joe's actions are constantly in judgment by white society. Ryga does not use a curtain to designate the opening, intermission or closing of the play. Instead, the symbols of Indian oppression are constantly in view of the audience. Past and present scenes from her life are highlighted with innovative lighting. An example is Rita Joe's captivity:

> (Rita Joe stands before magistrate and policeman. She is contained in a pool of light before them.)[73]
>
> (Harsh light on her. She turns away, aware she is in captivity)[74]
>
> (Lights isolate Father, another light with prison bar shadows isolates Rita Joe in her area of the stage)[75]

At the back of the stage, a mountain cyclorama, symbolizing the quiet country, is in place with a dark maze curtain in front, suggesting a dismal, depressive city scene. Ryga has the entire cast enter and face the audience minutes before the play actually begins. During the course of the play, the actors occasionally address the audience directly. Thus, Ryga gives the audience a reminder to accept their responsibility for the playwright's message.

Without consciously intending it, performances evoked a very different response at the close of the evening. An audience usually applaud at the end of a play, and sometimes show their appreciation verbally, but at this production there was complete silence. Joy Coghill remarked:

> ...it wasn't taken as a sort of dramatic event that you applauded afterwards. It was such a moving experience that people didn't want to clap. They simply were stunned in some very basic way. The performance ended with all the actors appearing from nowhere, coming out to stand looking at the audience. And as they walked away the audience always just sat there. The cast would be out of the theatre...and the audience was still sitting there. Then gradually one person would move, and another...the theatre ...emptied.[76]

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe was first produced by the Vancouver Playhouse Theatre on 23 November 1967. The play had the distinction of inspiring newspaper editorials and articles ever day after it opened. Reviews in the newspapers ranged from favorable to ecstatic. The play made a strong impact, as is evident in this review:

> Visually the stage...was stark, but dramatically so, the quality of the action elevated by the

> effect of a bare stage with luminous blue backdrop against which Rita's murderers would finally appear in silhouette. There was music. Most important there was poetry in the sense of heightened language with explicit significant content. We have come not to expect dialogue in the contemporary play to convey direct meaning. The meaning is submerged...It has been, not what two clowns (Beckett), or two middle-aged couples (Ionesco) actually say that matters, but what they do not say. For Ryga...the words still matter. He has a burning idealism which restores to words their traditional magic power, so neglected in the non-play of the "Theatre Of The Absurd".77

Chief Dan George wrote this Preface to George Ryga's The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe,

> The play carries a message all Canada needs to hear. I was amazed at the reaction the play received in Ottawa. People came to us to say that now, for the first time, they understood a little of what the Native Peoples have suffered and are suffering. The Indian People at this very time need to put their message before Canada because laws are being readied that will effect the Indian for years to come. They need, above all, to create sympathy and understanding, for they are depressed economically. It is useless for people to hear if they do not listen with their hearts - and when hearts are open, ears can hear. The message is true...it should be heard by all.78

There have been numerous productions of The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, professional and amateur, large and small. On 9 July 1969, at the National Art Centre in Ottawa, the play received a five-minute standing ovation on opening night, in place of the silent stillness when performed in Vancouver in 1966. Ryga had made some changes in his play since the original Vancouver Playhouse performance, as he was aware of the changing attitudes of the Indian community - from despairing resignation to determination and a renewed assertion of their native rights and values. The murder of Jamie Paul, previously forecast by the singer, gave his actual murder a more tragic quality at the play's

ending. Frances Hyland commented on these changes:

> ...the story of Rita Joe is already beginning to slip back into Canadian history. He wants to put the emphasis more on what is about to happen, which is the necessity for a complete re-examination of the Indian Affairs Department and its administration.[79]

The play reportedly had a noticeable impact on the Indian Affairs and Justice Minister who were present at the Ottawa performance. The Prime Minister and the Premier of British Columbia were photographed with the cast after the opening night performance in Ottawa. Prime Minister Trudeau called Ryga's play

> The greatest accomplishment in a century of Canadian theatre.[80]

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe was produced by Foundation Nationale de la Comédie on 19 November 1969. This was a French translation by Gratien Gélinas, a great compliment since it marked the "sole occasion on which Quebec's leading playwright has translated the work of an English-Canadian playwright".[81]

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe was performed as a ballet by the Royal Winnipeg Ballet at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa on 27 July 1971. One reviewer commented:

> The same message comes across through the abstracting medium of dance and many of Ryga's actual words intact...ballet takes place against a large motion picture screen, filled with a succession of images that relate Rita Joe's story to her environment. Ann Mortifee...with her guitar [sings] to accompaniment of a small orchestra. These ballads shape the flow of Vesak's choreography and help give it fluidity and a romantic quality in spite of the harshness of the subject. Rita Joe isn't played by a... Indian...Spanish dancer Anna Maria de Gorriz obviously knows what self-contempt and racial alienation mean...we watch her dance her rootless way from vagrancy to prostitution, hounded by the self-righteous voice of the courts.[82]

The Royal Winnipeg Ballet also toured Canada, the United States, Cuba and Australia with this ballet.

Ryga's play, The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, was performed in Canada and abroad. Ryga established Canadian drama on the international scene with productions of his play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it won an award for the best new production in 1973.[83] During its United States premiere at The Washington Theatre Club, Washington, D.C. May 1973, the play made a deep impression on audiences and critics alike:

> 'Canadian playwright', the words sound a little incongruous together...new cultural nationalism is being felt and expressed. Canadian playwrights have begun to appear...perhaps the best known of all recent plays has been given its American premiere. It deals with a social problem of urgent concern to Americans as well as Canadians.[84]
>
> As for author Ryga, he is obviously just the kind of disruptive influence we need.[85]

In November 1981, The Prairie Theatre Exchange, located on the southern fringe of Winnipeg's Indian ghetto, similar to the play's setting on Vancouver's skid row, opened a production of The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe. It was staged on ramps and platforms that wound through the theatre. The action took place around the audience on the floor, creating an intimate setting. Director Gordon McCall's decision to use natives created controversy, but most audiences agreed "the natives gave a richness to Ryga's dialogue and a true reading of its rhythms, patterns and nuances".[86] Ryga attended the play opening night and commented:

> I was very moved by it. My over-all impression was that some of the theatricality was sacrificed. But it was passionate, which I think is a fair and good exchange. Margo Kane as Rita Joe [native Edmonton actress raised by a white family] came as close as any actress can to becoming the part. Hers was an exhaustive interpretation. I feel this was probably the most unusual example I've seen of an actress bringing ...actual life experience to the stage. Virtually every fibre of her body was working recalling and projecting...experiences....[87]

The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe is the culmination of Ryga's writing. The themes that occur in this play were dealt with in varying degrees in his later plays. He acquired, through his many hours of re-writing, the ability to create a natural flow of his character's thoughts between present reality and their perceptions of the past. Ryga does not employ a progressive plot, but rather overlaps past with present, providing the whole picture only when the play is completed. His nonconsecutive organization contains real thematic and poetic significance. Through his creative abilities, he continued to express his concern for the socially oppressed, and encouraged his audience to effect a positive change.

Chapter Four

Sunrise On Sarah

George Ryga continued on mercilessly as Canada's playwright champion for the socially and politically underprivileged. Ryga's sympathies have always rested with the loner, the down-and-outer, the loser, the person at odds with or under duress from society. From Indian and The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe and the plight of the natives, he turned his energies toward another group who are often oppressed in society - women - in his play, Sunrise On Sarah. In this play, Ryga tackles one of the dominant themes of the twentieth century, the struggle of a woman to find personal fulfilment, and to discover personal identity.

Sunrise On Sarah was commissioned by the Banff School Of Fine Arts as the 1972 major production of the School's Drama Division. In the "Program Notes" Ryga calls his play, "A Carousel of Dreams...set in the corners of her [Sarah's] mind".[1]

Sunrise On Sarah represents an interesting new chapter in Ryga's career as a writer of plays. In a succession of fragments of her memories, dreams and aspirations, Ryga seeks to create a reflection of his character's struggle for personal freedom, fulfilment and most important, identity. The problem of "freedom versus restraint"[2] is an age old one, but it's been heightened in modern terms by the increasing fragility of certain conventions and standards of behavior. The problem is aggravated by the fact that fragile as these conventions may be, the person confined by them may be equally so. Such fragility becomes evident as the play unfolds.

Sarah, sometimes willingly, sometimes reluctantly, explores the recesses of her subconscious. The play makes it clear that Sarah's dilemma lies in the fact that she is approaching a crisis of identity. Her past intrudes into

her present consciousness. All her previous acquaintences have influenced what she is. But, also intruding are those "dreams and aspirations which might have made her into something different had they ever materialized".[3]

The initial story outline of the play reads like a domestic drama revolving around personal relationships in a conventional family context. The action is in sequence, and is realistic. The social context is specific, and the characters are individualized.

> The play deals with the bind of a woman caught up in the contradictions of her own humanity. Sarah is a (widowed) young mother, with a son just entering his teens. To support herself and the child, she has over the years worked in various...offices. A certain family closeness remained between herself and her mother. Although she was attractive and a warm person, Sarah avoided any involved relationships with men, as her first marriage had not been a good one. She met a young, undemanding musician... the relationship became a physical one. Robert then moved into her house and stayed...friends ...accepted Robert. But, the mother always viewed him with a certain suspicion...since he must be supported in part by Sarah. One evening, Robert informed her he was in love with another woman. Sarah was shocked and upset...reactions ...became mixed, self condemning...hostile. She met Stephen....attentive, warm, understanding. Sarah...strongly attracted to him...is confused ...[4]

However, in the play, the events and situations of this original outline are transformed beyond recognition. Instead of being set back into Sarah's past and appearing as memories, concrete reference points are discarded. The elements that do survive are transferred to the personality of the character, Sarah, who becomes the sole realistic figure. The effect of this concentration on Sarah is to isolate her.

Ryga's initial impulse for Sunrise On Sarah came from sharing an apartment with a woman who was going through a personality crisis after ending a love affair. This was

during the year he was teaching at the University Of British Columbia. Ryga disclosed he had,

> roamed the city interviewing many women her age. These were middle-class ladies who were remarkably candid. Their stories were the composite for the character and life of Sarah.[5]

What appears as an individual biography, because it is embodied on stage in a single actress, is really a kaleidoscopic blend of women's experiences merging into their common denominator. The play is a blend of many individual's perspectives - their hopes, their dreams, their fears and their terrors. This allows Ryga to fuse them into a single entity, expanding "the play's probing of a personal breakdown into a statement about society".[6]

As his "Program Notes" for the Banff premiere indicate, the significance of compiling data from a wide range of people is to create a universal image of "woman" drawn from the whole spectrum of socially and biologically defined relationships.

> Robust Tom Peacocke with the wind-defying chin and sidestepping gait of the prairie sailor... called me one day for a new play. Sending me through winter misty streets of Vancouver searching passing faces for a second soul-shivering view of mother-sister-lover-wife-and daughter. I found her with her books, operating telephones and laundromats... huddling at bus-stops from the rain...unclasping earrings listening for her child's whimpered demons of the night...standing pensive on the bridge, recalling slowly days of sun and pebbles from her life. At home with her in many dwellings, over sandwiches of storms, remorse and laughter...seeing mirrors of our times in her eyes...I did not sense so much a Woman as another aspect of myself![7]

Thomas Peacocke, Director of the Banff production, said of Sunrise On Sarah:

> George Ryga applies his special poetic insight into the human condition as he views it in today's terms.[8]

In Sunrise On Sarah, Ryga uses structural elements from the earlier plays. Memory and fantasy merge into present experience. Scenes are released from normal constraints of time and space. The freedom and fluidity explicitly reflect the workings of the mind. The only reality is the privacy of Sarah's bedroom into which she seems to have retreated. As the setting for the first draft makes clear:

> This is surrounded by a circular structure, intended to suggest the neural pathways of the brain. Backstage a labyrinth of elevations and intercepting angles of frames and ramps in greys and blacks. Suggestions of this labyrinth encircle the centre front part of stage and sweep down off stage into auditorium of theatre from both wings. Within this claustrophobic skull, the bed doubles as a psychiatrist's couch, relating sexuality and the search for identity, which form the two poles of the play.[9]

Intimately related to his handling of the bedroom setting, is Ryga's concern with the city as an alien place. In Sunrise On Sarah, the "devitalizing city is narrowed to this single claustrophobic room".[10] The setting is created largely by lighting. The linking of theme with setting and lighting effects is continued in the use of music and poetry.

The setting requested by Ryga for the Lennoxville production, July 1973, included the

> ...bedroom which forms the core of a setting that has great flexibility in elevations, lighting potential...bedroom is a private cell with a soft light....[11]

Two of the reviews provide a clear description of the actual set at the Lennoxville production.

> ...a claustrophobic room in which Sarah and her psychiatrist struggle for her mind, while a Greek chorus of her past parades through... set. Its a bit like an oyster shell, but the room is hardly a pearl, it's more like a padded cell...all dressed in a beautiful shade of blue

> which is both soothing and yet melancholy.[12]
>
> Around her pale and tasteful bedroom, designer Michael Eagon has run a wide, curved ramp, extending behind a high, shadowy gauze behind which the line-up of Sarah's personal dramatic personae can be occasionally glimpsed. In twos and threes they descend the ramp to be confronted by the resentful woman....[13]

The "liquid dramaturgy" Ryga has been working towards reaches its fullest expression in Sunrise On Sarah, when his characters change significance and merge "in a shifting perspective of episodic impressions".[14] Sarah is not simply the central character in a play which is largely about her:

> All other characters are seen through her eyes or exist in her. Ryga was helped by his own brand of 'liquid dramaturgy' which he has perfected since The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe. I am referring to the magical ease and naturalness with which characters in Ryga plays move between past and present between various levels of reality and poetic imagination.[15]

The audience perceives everything not only through Sarah, but as Sarah perceives it. Thus we have no way of ascertaining what is true and what is not. But it does not matter what is actually true, only what is true for Sarah. The drama does not revolve around Sarah; the drama "is" Sarah. In this sense, the experiment of the dream-like "liquid dramaturgy", the creation of Sarah's mind, is highly successful.

Ryga's best memory of Sunrise On Sarah was in the original production at Banff when the trustees panicked after Ryga refused to cut certain lines. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was present. He didn't faint![16]

> ...Eh...grunts of pain and lust in the bathtub ...Fellatio, sweet as ancient music of the church, over midnight cocoa in the kitchen.[17]

In the Banff production, Ryga supplied Sarah with a sort of alter ego: a lithe female dancer, clad in a flesh colored body stocking. She played a key role throughout

the play, acting as a reflection of Sarah's actual passions and drive and thereby underlining the nature of Sarah's repressions.[18] Sarah's psyche was symbolically externalized in the dancer, who mimed the mood and emotions of Sarah's soul. At the beginning, for example:

> ...her sexual partners enter in silhouette, and the dancer rises from a position of dejection and dances for escape in ever tightening circles, then attacks the men, forcing them away, except for the lover, (the symbolic projection of Lee) who...begins to fondle and caress her.[19]

The dancer is sometimes alone, sometimes with other men, her full body stocking representing nakedness. At the end, Sarah strips off the clothes of social conformity to reveal the same non-costume, and embraces her alter ego as she declares:

> ...I am whole and free! I turn, my body and my mind to watch the sunrise.[20]

Various references to the dancer appeared after the play was performed at Banff, August 1972.

> Somehow, despite the admirable dancing...seemed contrived and unnecessary spelling out of the conflicts of Sarah's nature. Yet the dancer proves to be essential to the play's final resolution.[21]

> ...dancer who symbolized the young unmolded free spirit detracted from the action as many times as she added to it.[22]

> ...mute dancer, representing...Sarah stripped of words, illusions and self deception...providing an exact counterbalance to 'The Man'...a device to my liking, but one that interfered with the rhythmic flow...language and ultimately, the meaning of the play.[23]

The choice of women as the central figure reflects Ryga's perception that women may be more conditioned by a stereotyped role. He uses women to provide an example of the psychology of exploitation, since he considers them less able to assert a separated identity than the male equivalent. For many women lacking status or function outside the family context, personal fulfilment is limited to

sexuality. This is the level of experience where women are viewed externally by the promotion and commercialization of sex as a consumer product. Sexuality stands as the most positive avenue for renewal, and as the area of greatest manipulation. This analysis reflects Ryga's assessment of the women's movement, which was incorporated into the first draft of the play:

> Emma:...I go to court, and I'm at a disadvantage, because...Its run by men who decide justice and dispense it. I go to a doctor to get myself tied off from having any more children, and he tells me I have to have my husband's consent...That bastard hasn't made one human decision in his lifetime, yet he inherits the power over small children he will never know or see, because he has a small thing dangling out front of him...[24]

This discussion, although the central point around which the action revolved in the first script, was cut to a single oblique mention in revisions after the Banff premiere. Possibly this may have been because of the criticism that its teaching was too obvious and out of context. Also, perhaps, it was thematically too restricting, since it contradicted the implication of Ryga's previously quoted "Program Notes" from the Banff production; "...I did not sense so much a Woman as another aspect of myself".[25] Instead of reflecting the predicament of the exploited of both sexes, it related the play too narrowly to the female section of society. Ryga's cut of the women's discussion reduces the focus to a private and seemingly personal world.

After the Banff production, the script was sent to Lennoxville's Artistic Director, William Davis, for consideration. In the form in which it was received, the play showed its potential as a powerful and exciting illumination of a troubled woman. It was clear to both Ryga and Davis, however, that further work was required. After a

thorough rewrite, Sunrise On Sarah opened at the Lennoxville Festival, 13 July 1973, directed by William Davis. This version was published by Talonbooks.[26]

In Sunrise On Sarah, Ryga displays his most intimate development of character. The main character, Sarah, is a guilt-ridden, middle-aged school teacher experiencing a period of nervous collapse. Everyday activities and duties prove beyond her. After conforming to accepted notions of female behavior for most of her life, she is beginning to clarify her own desires. Sarah experiences moments of "freedom", but remains trapped in the false idea that conformity will bring peace and tranquility. Ryga uses "liquid dramaturgy" to highlight the intense emotional confusion which women experience as they attempt to integrate societal and personal expectations. This "liquid dramaturgy" is evident within Sunrise On Sarah by a "dream world" where the characters emerge, struggle with Sarah, them melt away again. As the play continues, the action swings from Sarah's fantasies back to more realistic interaction with her psychiatrist. The mood throughout is one of anguish as the confusion in Sarah's mind becomes ever more apparent to the audience.

Ryga has chosen an educated and materially well-off woman, a point emphasized by dialogue, in order to portray women more generally.

> You are an average girl from an average home doing an average job of work....[27]

Sarah is not an outcast like Rita Joe was in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe. Ryga demonstrates that if even one of the privileged members of society cannot find fulfilment, then it is an accusation against society. "If a system cripples those who are rewarded and even apparently liberated, as well as destroying its rejects, then there can be no excuse for avoiding radical change".[28]

The action takes place during only one evening in the

bedroom of Sarah's apartment. Presenting the characters in Sarah's past, the play pursues her search for deliverance from the ghosts that haunt her. Summoning a psychiatrist to her bedroom in the middle of the night, Sarah takes inventory of her private demons; one dominating mother, one long-dead father and several lovers, real or imagined. In the isolation of her bedroom, Sarah is interrogated by the sadistic psychiatrist. Ryga introduces a character known only as "man". He operates in an ambivalently sadistic or supportive manner so that we assume he is a grotesque, fantasy projection of her own anxieties and her self-destructive desire to conform. He is the demon within her. His function in the play is curiously blurred, since in his frequent confrontations with Sarah he serves alternately as official questioner, the other person taking part in a dialogue, and devil's advocate - one who upholds the wrong side of an indefensible cause for argument's sake. Although he is initially identified as her doctor, "the man's" psychiatric treatment is a mixture of the sadistic and the seductive. He becomes successively a gigolo, a homosexual, a male model and an exorcist.

> ...I model men's wear in a fashionable discotheque! Sometimes I beach-comb for young boys ...at other times I amuse women who have given up hope![29]

> (he exists as)...only the sound of your voice, dear lady...I am a sponge...a confessor...a reflector of your fears...an amplifier of your pain![30]

Sarah pleads with her psychiatrist for help;

> Will somebody tell me where I am? Where I've come to?...Who among my friends is real and who is not?[31]

Similar to people who have mental problems, Sarah is compulsive about details of exaggerated urgency:

> I wore a green dress that day, and white shoes with black laces.[32]

Sarah, desperately searching for her elusive world of reality, cries out:

> Somebody...please help me...I don't know where I parked my car...or what day this is.[33]
>
> Someplace, I forgot my handbag...in it was my name.[34]

The psychiatrist keeps insisting that she remember what she has eaten. Her response is a drug-filled one:

> Will someone take me where there are flowers! In May, the allyssum blooms like music in the Okanagan valley![35]

The sadistic psychiatrist however, takes delight in taunting his patient by driving her back through her fantasies:

> The only thing to do...is to start at the beginning, as we've done before![36]

Sunrise On Sarah is about the breakdown of a human spirit. Sarah is a badly oppressed woman who wants and needs a man so desperately that if necessary she will invent one. Her first spoken line, addressed to the unknown male character is:

> You see, it is no good leaving me alone. I told you, it would never work.[37]

Here is a woman whose initial claim is that she is unable to live without men; the play which follows this statement bears her words out. However, the play also reveals that she cannot live with men. She is helplessly trapped by her inability to cope with either situation. Sarah's passionate hatred for men is established, only to be followed by her insatiable need for them.

> ...he paid me for standing up, and he paid me for lying down. When that didn't work, he used his fists. Once he threw me through the plate glass window of the living room. I flew out into the garden, not a scratch on me. But when he looked out of the window to see if he'd killed me, a shard of glass came down across his wrist! (shouts joyfully)...bastard stood there swearing, while the blood spurted over his hands with his heartbeats! I thumbed my nose at him...I wanted him to die! (The wild triumph passes from

her face. She stares at the man, moves to him, plays with the lapels of his coat)[38]

Sarah exhibits no power, not even womanly sexual power. She lives only because a man loves or despises her. Her most ecstatic moment is the result of the shallowest of compliments which she must prompt the "man" to give.

Sarah: (ecstatic)
The eyes of a poet! Say it! (Man takes his hands off her and turns away. He stretches with boredom, and yawns)
Man:
The eyes of a poet...
Sarah: (still ecstatic)
With men like you a woman lives forever! Thank God you've come...I feel alive again.[39]

The men of Sarah's memory, and the "man", refuse her, tease her, boss her, insult her, ridicule her, even call her by other names when they make love to her.

Hey, Dolly - you be sweet to me![40]

Yet, Sarah is not deterred. It is apparently only through man's admiration that she feels alive.

Sarah is employed in education, but her most important job seems to be drawing up lists of absentee students:

I had to make out a report on absenteeism from classes...I checked the names of students... names of boys and names of girls...nothing else made sense.[41]

The only time she apparently is in the class-room she says:

The class will come to order! This morning we will begin with a lesson in responsibility. Because contemporary values drift and alter, I have been liberal and tolerant of many things. To shelter you...I have had to lie...something one does in life as well![42]

I lied and degraded the dignity of my person and profession in an effort to protect you.[43]

In Sunrise On Sarah, again we see Ryga's theme of fathers, and father figures, who betray. This is central to nearly every one of his works. A "more subtle treatment of the father theme" is worked out where Sarah's

father is dead long before the play begins.[44] She longs for a father's love and attention as a child. Sarah is pained by his rejection because she was not a son:

> I wanted a son! What use is a girl to me? I've got machinery an' land for a boy an' me! You feed a girl...dress her...teach her things ...for what? For some other man who has a son, that's what for.[45]

This longing and pain are vividly symbolized by the flake of his dried blood:

> He fell off his tractor and was ground up by the roto-tiller on our ten-acre berry farm. When they took him away they forgot to wash the roto-tiller blades. The blood on the blades blackened in the sun and flaked. I went into the field...wondering if he thought of me at the moment of his death...I tore a loose flake of blood off the...blade that killed him. I held it to the sun...and then...I ate it! After I swallowed father's blood...my throat burned. It tasted strange and frightening.[46]

Sarah feels herself abandoned by a dead father who may not have loved her.

> Animal!...who showed more tenderness to farm dogs than to us. What power you had over a mother and her daughter! What power you still have! You are as corrosive as rust, even in death!...goddamn you for that![47]

Sarah resents the fact that he ignored her while attempting to reach out to the mother, even after the mother had left:

> Her mother never loved me...not at all. Lady I always called her...I've been good to you, lady.[48]
>
> But it wasn't all your fault, lady. I'd never say that...not even after you done what you done to me.[49]

Because her father is dead, there is no way for her to resolve the feelings of incompleteness and fantasy that disturb her relationships with the other men in her life. Only her psychiatrist, a surrogate father, exists in her real world.

Certainly, the father-figure is responsible for her animosity to the chairman of the school trustees. In the Lennoxville production, Ryga doubled the role of the father with that of the school chairman to emphasize the man's authoritarian status. This comes in a very realistic encounter at a teacher's meeting, done with the vehemence and nastiness that may be imagined develops at such staff functions. It may well be this untidy desertion by her father that makes her resist all other men in Sarah's life.

Shortly after Sarah's birth, her mother abandoned the family. After the death of Sarah's father when she was only three, she was returned to and raised by her mother. She cautioned her daughter:

> Never give more than you take...life is a bargain a wise woman makes with God. Nothing less, and nothing more than that. Living with a man...any man...is a sacrifice of soul for a woman. I know.[50]

Sarah is smothered by a mother, who cleverly urged a manipulative feminine obedience:

> A loud woman, like a loud man, is obscene somehow. A true woman wins more with dignity and poise than with arguments. Let them talk.[51]

Sarah combines the contradictions of her mother's professional liberation:

> ...lady wanted to go out workin'...she wanted to go to work for someone else.[52]

and social customs:

> She wove your hair in braids...had your feet in high-heeled shoes at twelve...a girdle and some lipstick were the final touch. Sarah was an average girl...It was right, don't you think, that she should resemble other girls her age?[53]

with a suppressed longing to express darker passions. Sarah recalls, with bitterness:

> What will you be, my mother asked me once, when you grow up? She never asked, how will you live? Will you be happy? Will you remember me....[54]

Sarah's mother forces her into the arms of the psychiatrist

with her accusations resulting from the constraints of middle class puritanism.

> I never speak of all the filth I've seen. I raised my daughter...with purity of heart and mind.[55]

The audience receives a glimpse of the inner turmoil of Sarah's mind as she confides:

> I once wanted to be a call-girl...not just a common street walker, but the most outrageous whore in town!...to get even...to free myself. To prove to my mother I was alive...to learn how to conquer the worst things in my life.[56]

Ryga's Sarah is a vital, sensual woman, ill-suited to the repressions of her mother's generation.

Sarah is presented by Ryga as the portrait of a "new woman". She will not, or cannot, accept her traditional role, and is unable to fulfil herself in contemporary societies attitude towards her. Sarah is pulled in two directions during the action of the play; towards acceptability and socialization by her psychiatrist "man", and towards a primitive, earthy fantasized eroticism by her perfect lover (Lee). Sarah does not know how to give or receive love, but she yearns for it, nevertheless. She is unable to find a man who can match both her passions and her sensitivity.

> I expected love, tolerance and understanding for the parts of me that hurt...ached with sorrow... or cried with baby voices in the night.[57]

To Sarah, Lee is the lover who evoked her animal passions. The barefoot Lee, virile and central European, who has physically smashed the law office he worked in, is explicitly a wish fulfilment. Representing the vitality of the wild, free from the burden of security, he is the opposite to the "man". The significance of all the men in Sarah's life is summed up in Lee. Alas, he is a charade. Lee is only a figure of desperate fantasy, derived from seeing a shirtless young man riding a bicycle on the street

as she passed by in her car.

> You whom I never knew...to whom I gave the name of Lee...bicycle rider of a remembered morning. Apollo of the super-market...breeder of dark children in a grey concrete wasteland.[58]

This imagined creature is a ruthless, yet desirable lover.

> I loved him for his laughter...the red rage and blue serenity of his nature. I loved him for the animal he evoked in me...he made me laugh and cry in a voice that was not my own. He taught me obscenities and poetry until I could not distinguish them apart...he taught me things about myself I had not known.[59]

However, some of Lee's speechs are identical, in sentiment, to those of Sarah's father:

> Where I come from, a woman had less value than a milkcow![60]

> What use are daughters to us. Strong men must raise strong daughters. Only then will they be loved.[61]

This view attempts to condition Sarah to think of women as worthless, unless raised by men in their image.

During the course of the play, Sarah relives relationships with many different men. Sarah has pursued relationships with men who treated her with contempt:

> I'm still the goddamned boss here an' don't you forget it.[62]

> I will hurt you if you argue...you know that...[63]

> Hear me, bitch! You are not to complain to another woman or that fancy faggot of a doctor again! Is that understood?[64]

> I did what he wanted me to do. I loved him...I was afraid of him.[65]

Sarah also had relationships with men whom she could control until she despised them:

> You could never argue - never look me in the eye when you were sad.[66]

Other memory figures include; a labourer, whom Sarah frustrates with her attempts at intellectual improvement:

> I've wept for you...for what you might have been. You could've been a general...or a statesman...or a technologist, with power over rivers, forests, migratory birds...people....[67]

and a civil servant, from whom she condescends to accept details of her proper conduct.

> I will get cross with you if you don't stop! Not now darling...I have a headache...No, Sarah! Not again. These walls are paper thin...there might be people listen....[68]

All the men in Sarah's thoughts are as fragmentary as she feels herself, despised if they are weak or gentle, feared if they are strong.

In Sunrise On Sarah, Ryga gives us a glimpse into the agony of women in our society. All of Ryga's central figures in his plays and novels find themselves oppressed by a society they did not choose. Ryga has presented, in Sarah, as in Rita Joe, women who are deeply, thoroughly oppressed. Ryga's women seem to be on trial by men. This is more obvious in the case of Rita Joe, but Sarah is also on trial with the "man" who refuses to understand her. Neither of these women seems to be able to defend herself to men. As has been observed, the male figures are allowed to fight back. They all struggle to change their circumstances. But, the women are unable to cope in their male dominated world. They seem powerless, unable to make any advance.

Sarah confronts the void of her own existence and with great pain struggles to reconstruct her life. She finally achieves an integration of her personality. She begins to become whole once more. By the end of the play, Sarah has gained the insight to reject her fantasies and to dismiss her psychiatrist.

> I prayed for release from the gathering fear of men with tablets and stethoscopes...this violation of my womanhood must end, doctor! I don't know what hell I walk through from here on, but I won't need you anymore. The frightening thing is not my sickness, but your cure.[69]

Sarah has been caught up in a world of selfishness and contempt. Previously, whenever she attempted to move ahead, she became filled with fear and quickly retreated. However, Ryga suggests there is a glimmer of hope in the new generation, if she will gather her courage and look ahead toward the future.

> ...for a moment now and then in the dark, sleepless night...I am whole and free! I turn, my body and my mind, to watch the sunrise... hoping for a third being to join us...hoping for a miracle some morning on some other road.[70]

Sunrise On Sarah was received with varied reactions by the audience according to age, life experience and philosophy.

> ...some middle-aged and elderly patrons walked out in the second act when certain words were used. A fellow, fortyish, fell asleep. A young businessman in his thirties said the play had no beginning, no middle, and no end, and he couldn't figure out what Ryga was talking about. There was a girl in the front row, about twenty who was crying, when the production finished. A poet who had seen all of Ryga's plays commented that this was by far the best play that Ryga had ever written. The play has poetry as well as message ...words flow beautifully, sometimes cruelly. My hands are cold and my knees are shaking. I have just walked down a long hallway with tears streaming down my face...Ryga's latest play has turned me upside down and inside out with its poetry and incredible perception.[71]

When uncomfortable truths are presented, there is often a natural resistance from many members of the audience. Ryga believed the writer's goal is overcoming this resistance so that the audience may engage in and be affected by the reality being expressed. Ryga attempted to illustrate the multi-levels of consciousness to the audience. He struggled throughout his life to express in his writing the integration of many different parts of self encompassing past experiences.

Chapter Five
Conclusions

Ryga is a novelist of considerable power. The source of themes in his mature work can be traced from his early short stories and poems through his novels. The novels have a sentimental tone, but are offset by the realism in Ryga's description of the marginal existence of the people. Ryga describes grinding poverty of stubborn settlers in his novels, fighting drought and heat during the Depression. They are rarely rewarded for their efforts, and remain trapped and later shaped by their surroundings. Men live and work in a desolate landscape without any hope that their efforts will bring about a better life. The novels may well include autobiographical elements, since they describe in vivid detail the subsistence farm life that Ryga experienced growing up on a homestead in northern Alberta.

However harsh they may be, Ryga portrays rural areas as man's true home, and contrasts them with the endless concrete in our alien, impersonal cities. A sense of spiritual homelessness is apparent in Ryga's writing, and many of his characters search, but never seem to find, a more elevated existence and a more equitable life. The rural areas represent lost youth, innocence and happiness as compared with the view of city life with its responsibilities, and expectations of a permanent job. An example of this contrast can be found in the play, The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe. There is a clear distinction between the remembered childhood happiness of growing up in the country as compared to the harsh realities of adult life in the city. The priest, Father Andrew, counsels Rita Joe:

> A lot of things are different in the city. It's easier here on the reserve...life is simpler.[1]

Jamie Paul cries out in despair:

> I'm scared of dyin'...in the city. They don't care for one another here...You got to be smart or have a good job to live like that.[2]

Hungry Hills set the characteristic tone of Ryga's novels. It was first published in Canada in 1963, adapted by Ryga for television in 1964, and published in England in 1965. The original publication was made possible through a grant from the Canada Council. The land referred to in Hungry Hills was the arid, dry, parched foothills of south-western Alberta in the Depression years. A strange, stark novel, it was a work that may not have been universally appreciated but it could not be ignored.

Ryga's novel, Hungry Hills, is a story of teen-ager Snit Mandolin, who is forcibly abducted from his home by provincial welfare authorities and sent to an Edmonton orphanage. The prison-like atmosphere is so repugnent to him that he runs away, finding refuge with a kindly old garage owner. The business is sold three years later and Snit is given a cheque for $300.00 as part payment on back wages. Snit declines an offer from his old employer to help him obtain work at another garage in the city, and is drawn back to the country where he grew up. Nostalgia drives him back to search for his roots and to try and re-establish a home. Snit's discoveries about himself and the members of Ryga's fictional community introduce themes that will be enlarged upon in later works.

Snit's father had been a failure at his initial attempt at farming in Saskatchewan. He was attracted to the Alberta foothills by the promise of cheap land. The hardships encountered from this harsh landscape however, develop many character defects as the family sinks into a morass of poverty. Snit's family, along with others in the community of foothills people, are losers, struggling against forces they do not understand. Common ideals are shared, however: to rise above the miserable life they have led on this barren land and preserve some dignity to mark their time on earth. Snit shows his contempt for his neighbors

who have always regarded him as something undesirable:

> With 300 bucks in my pocket I was accomplished... grown up and rich - and nobody was ever going to spit in my eye again.[3]

Disillusioned as the days pass, he realizes, "there were no friends here - there never would be".[4]

When Snit first arrives back in the old neighborhood, he is confused about his place in the economic and social life of the community.

> I had forgotten how a human being smells in poverty - the musty smell of sweat and old clothes, and hair and feet that don't get washed. I began to wonder if it wasn't all a bad mistake.[5]

> I had forgotten the harsh cruelty of the land and its people - the desperate climate which parched both the soil and the heart of man.[6]

> I tried to think of how much money would be required to get the farm functioning again, but all my planning only depressed me. If only it would rain. If only it would rain.[7]

The people had been brutally battered by nature which seemed bent on destroying them, and in the process reduces them to their most animalistic motives as they struggle desperately for survival. Snit is bitter as he cries out,

> This wasn't farming - this wasn't even living. It was penal servitude to the blasted hills and desert-making sun; yet men clung to the soil like flies to a cadaver and wouldn't let go.[8]

In Ryga's novels, as in his plays, the father is usually identified with the land. In Sunrise On Sarah, although the father is dead when the play begins, Sarah recalls their life together when her father worked his ten acres of land. In Hungry Hills, Aunt Matilda becomes a surrogate parent to Snit when he returns to the farm. She has worked the land alone after the death of Snit's parents - an ageing bitter woman whose resentment is apparent as she cries out in anguish:

> There is no God! If there is a God, why don't He take pity on us and give us what the heart wants most? Why don't He give us some rain -

> and a garden of flowers - just once? Why? Because there ain't no Hell for us who live in this Hell here - and as for the other place, it's all a nice story and nothing more.[9]

Snit's Aunt is a woman whose passion and vitality have been gnarled and thwarted since her youth by the aching poverty of life on a barren prairie farm. Snit sadly realizes:

> ...if the aunt I remembered was no more, it was only because she had become what my mother and father had become in the end - broken on the earth like pieces of rotten wood by the cowardly greed of these hungry hills.[10]

Ironically, Aunt Matilda's name is Mandolin - the instrument of the Ukrainian people, used when they danced and sang. Unfortunately, she seldom finds moments in which to celebrate. It is she and Snit whose sympathy for the suffering of the people and animals makes them the only characters of the hills in whom human kindliness has not atrophied. It is old Aunt Matilda, once seen weeping over the grave of her dead love, who embodies the last vestige of the human spirit in the spiritually dead community:

> Aunt Matilda, lying on top of Stanley Muller's grave...her cheek pressed into the mound... pleading and sad in the cooing tones of a pigeon.[11]

Aunt Matilda has learned to endure the consequences of her choices. The life she clings to is miserable, but she clings nevertheless.

> I gotta die, Snit - same as anybody else. But I ain't gonna die easy. My conscience won't let me.[12]

Aunt Matilda is the one figure who seems to have survived the tortures of life in the hills with any dignity, and she attempts to teach a kind of stoical integrity to her nephew.

> ...she stood there erect and proud, like nothing would knock her down - nothing she saw or lived through...Once you've made up your mind there's no turning back.[13]

Part of the wisdom Snit learns from old Aunt Matilda is that one cannot always find meaning for one's life in traditional love or respectability.

> ...I don't want no love from you - nor any respect. As a family, we didn't do nothin' to deserve it. But you got to think - your life is too dear to throw away on...a piece of hilly, rocky land.14

In a bitter struggle to survive and escape the hills, Snit forms a partnership with Johnny Swift, who boldly says:

> When we get enough saved up, we light out and start some business of our own - and to hell with the hills and all the ass-holes in em!15

Life in these hills is no romantic idyll. To survive in such an environment seems to require the inarticulate endurance of Aunt Matilda, or the ruthlessness and outlawry of Johnny Swift. Aunt Matilda warns Snit about Johnny Swift:

> ...He's no good at all - he'll only bring you trouble...living off people he growed up with. Folks who work got feelin's for one another. Johnny don't have no feelin's - he's like a dog gone wild.16

Snit, in spite of his Aunt's warning, is drawn into the world of Johnny Swift, into moonshining and innumerable irresponsible conflicts which come to a head in violence. Johnny is a brutal bullying type but he needs Snit's known wealth as a cover if he is ever to dare to spend his illicit earnings. Snit needs hope. This poor lad has grown up seeking love and affection, but has found neither. This unequal partnership leads inevitably to tragedy and Ryga presents it with classical starkness. Snit finally rejects the criminal alternative, as he valiantly attempts to make the land productive again.

The isolation of the hill people is contrasted with the unity of the Ukrainians when Aunt Matilda recalls the events that led up to the migration of the Mandolin family

to Alberta from Saskatchewan. They had lived in the midst of a large Ukrainian settlement in Saskatchewan, whose sense of group responsibility is shown.

> Those of us who didn't speak their language called them dumb-bohunks - the silent ones. They worked hard, stayed outa trouble and lived on next to nothing. Then, one day we heard that twenty young men among them - chosen to speak for everybody, themselves and us - had left on foot to go to Regina and ask the government for better prices on grain and livestock. We stopped calling them names after that...it takes a lot of guts and figuring to reach a point where folks that suffer make a decision to speak up as best they know how.[17]

Although the members of the delegation to Regina were arrested for vagrancy, their initiative provided a focus for community action. Thereafter the settlers found an enriched sense of community. Ryga describes his own community, perhaps, when he was a boy, as he relates how the settlers in the Saskatchewan community

> ...started to work...together - not like here, where one neighbour don't know another, an' every family is afraid of itself...used to come together...on Sundays...talk and argue about how we needed better roads, an' fertilizer for the fields. Ukes used to sing, playing their mandolins, an' the girls dancing. We were all poor as hell, but when you laughed it made it easier.[18]

Instead of participating in this renewed community, however the Mandolins found themselves outsiders, their assumptions of superiority rudely shaken.

> It wasn't enough to stop calling them names - we would have to...run like hell to catch up, instead of standing still like we'd done for a long time.[19]

In the hill country of southwestern Alberta, Ryga stresses that the aridity of the soil is reflected in the attitude of the people: in their hostility, narrowness, and lack of charity towards one another. The moving episode when Snit discovers that his mother and father were brother and sister is a powerful comparison for the inbred barrenness of spirit of the desolate area. Aunt Matilda

sadly recalls the past:

> We done it long ago...We done it ourselves, Snit, don't you see? Other folks had no part of it. When two sisters and a brother came on this farm ...we turned ourselves inside out, killing everything we touched until we didn't know what was right or wrong anymore. There was no proper life for anyone when the work was done...instead of going out...saving ourselves for a good life... we didn't do right by ourselves, and we didn't do right by you. Your pa and ma paired off and you were born.[20]

Prior to the suicide of Snit's father, he sorrowfully says to Snit's mother:

> We did something awful wrong. All the fires in hell won't burn it out.[21]

The humanizing quality of man and his need to love and be loved is illustrated when Aunt Matilda saves Snit's life - using the same gun with which Snit's father killed himself. Aunt Matilda's love for Snit, hidden by rage and bitterness, is revealed both literally and symbolically. The emotional drought is finally broken with the tears of Aunt Matilda, while Snit comments

> Cry for both of us because we gotta cry a lot if we gonna live.[22]

Ryga's Ballad Of A Stonepicker is a moving novel about poor, underprivileged white dirt farmers. Their despairing loss of hope is heartbreaking, but more important, the theme used here is amplified further in the play Indian. In the novel, Ryga vividly expresses his concern for all oppressed people, Indian and white alike.

> I cry. Believe me, man - I drop down my head and cry. I cry for every goddamned day I've spent here, rooted to a hundred and sixty acres of mud, rock and bush. I've stood for hours out there in the field, the wind blowing all around me, drying the soil and sapping the water out of my flesh. I've felt it all, but could never tell others how I felt. I cry because...I've lost life itself.[23]

> ...everything's dyin' in this country...you don't live here. It's a damned graveside, that's what it is. The place of the blasted and the dead

> ...look at the bloody country. Grey...thirsty... hot. Same's the farmers.[24]

This stark environment comes to life with dramatic intensity as Ryga presents various episodes of the past.

Ryga uses ballads and songs to complement or counterpoint themes; in Ballad Of A Stonepicker, the title is only used metaphorically. A series of flashback scenes are utilized, recalled by the older brother, while the silent reporter stands by. The older brother, as the narrator, is at first awkward and strained, but as the novel unfolds all the characters begin to take form.

The older brother is forced to stop school early to help the father work the worthless farm so Jim, the younger brother, can continue his education. The family sinks into debt, culminating with a maximum bank loan.

> ...mama was sitting...patching over last year's clothes for the winter ahead. My old man was staring out the window.
> "What's wrong? Didn't we make any money this year that we're back on the same clothes we wore last year this time?"
> "Sure we made money, kid."...but he didn't look at me.
> "...it's gone out to Jim again...no one said it was gone so quick!"
> ...he was so mad one of his cheeks was jerking with a jumpy nerve.
> "I don't want to hear another word about your brother, you hear me? Jim's going to make it up to us. A couple more years in school and there'll be more than just his picture in the papers - there'll be...big money".[25]

The central theme in Ryga's writing - fathers and father figures who betray - is apparent in most of his plays. In The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, this theme becomes evident. David Joe is a loving and responsible father to Rita Joe. She is betrayed, however, by the father figures of the priest, the social worker, the tire-store boss and the magistrate. In Ballad Of A Stonepicker, this theme is introduced in the relationship between the father and his two sons.

The father continually makes sacrifices for Jim. The older son, deprived of his father's love and attention, longs for some recognition. Jealous and resentful, he accuses his brother Jim of not helping with the farm work. The father defends Jim.

> "you leave Jim alone. He's working with his head. There's gonna be some good come out of it. Our help now is going to make something of him."[26]

Later, Jim, now a Rhodes scholar in England, longing for compassion and understanding, writes to his older brother, a letter filled with doubts and confusion concerning his purpose in life. The older brother is unable to give any counsel since he knows only manual work, and consequently cannot acknowledge Jim's pleas for help. The news comes that Jim has been killed in a motorcycle crash in England, perhaps a suicide, perhaps not. The older son sorrowfully comments:

> I cry for Jim and not hearing his story before he decided there'd never be anyone to hear him.[27]

The older son rebels when the parents contemplate further loans to have the body brought home for burial.

> "No! You're not borrowing a damned penny more and that's that!"[28]

As time passes, he cannot forget this poignant scene.

> ...it was they who suffered, for without knowing it myself then, I accused them for failing Jim, me and themselves.[29]

The father dies, leaving the rejected son to grieve for what might have been.

> Man, I sure wish my old man was alive! I sure need him now! You work with a man, even if he's your father and you don't see eye to eye with him. He's still your chum as long as you pull... heavy stones off the same field.[30]

Central to most of Ryga's writing is the elusive nature of love and the search for its meaning. Ryga's characters are often tormented by their need for love, but find themselves in a world that denies it. In Ballad Of

A Stonepicker, the shy, insecure farm lad finds the girl he loves but realizes he has no financial future to offer her.

> I pulled her to me and kissed her on the mouth, and her friends looking on. Then I turned away and went home, blind, because my eyes were full of tears and I couldn't stop them coming.[31]

Far from being a fulfilling experience, love, especially sexual love, is shown as a destructive force. In Hungry Hills, the perverting force of love is implied in the incest of the Mandolins. In Ballad Of A Stonepicker, Ryga rejects physical love. He sees it as a weakness, or a temporary escape from reality. Ryga illustrates this in the pathetic infatuation of Clem, the blacksmith. When the father scolds Clem for continuing to give financial support to the wife who has deserted him, he explains:

> Let her have what happiness God can give her now. You don't understand how I feel. My love...the way I wish it to be. Let her have this.[32]
>
> ...a man must give happiness to the woman who needs his help.[33]

Perhaps, Ryga shows the brutality of sexual love most vividly by the coupling of Marta Walker and Hector in her father's tool shed:

> I stopped, wanting to steal over to the shed and spy on them, to share by listening to them in their sinful pleasure. No. I had to run away from here. Then my foot kicked the dog...still warm and wet. They had to kill the dog to have each other. In the dark house, Eric Walker was having himself a good sleep.[34]

Ryga's vision of the fragility of love is perhaps most poignantly conveyed in his description of Mary and Peter Ruptash, in Ballad Of A Stonepicker.

> ...They'd been married fifteen years before they had a kid - a girl with a missing arm...It had learned to walk and was able to say "Mama, I busy" and "da - da", when it caught diphtheria and died. Pete had to beat his wife with his fists to take away the kid so he could bury it.[35]

Ryga portrays the cruelty that may result from unrequited

love when he describes the infatuation of Freddy, the idiot, for beautiful Sophie. Sophie taunts him as she scorns him, causing Freddy to seek revenge.

> The most beautiful girl between here and town is Sophie Makar. She never married, and she won't marry. Hers is the kind of beauty that don't ever marry...and here there's nothing else but to marry, farm and raise kids.[36]

> ...thin white scar...runs from just under her eye down her cheek to her throat...it gives her beautiful face just a touch of cruelty.[37]

Although Ryga rejects romantic and physical love, he shows the bond between individuals to be of much the same importance. This may be a family relationship, such as the one that develops between Snit and Aunt Matilda in Hungry Hills, or between Indian and his brother in Indian, when Indian cradles his brother in his arms before mercifully killing him. Occasionally, the relationship may be between man and animal. In Hungry Hills, the father expresses profound grief after the death of his horse. The son later recalls:

> If he didn't see me coming, I'd find him talking to the horse as he worked...as he dressed him down for the night in the barn...listening to him apologize to the horse for working him so hard, and promising him all sorts of pleasant things 'soon' - when times got better.[38]

Ryga illustrates this bond in Ballad Of A Stonepicker as the narrator relates an episode of Timothy and his ox.

> Timothy had to work hell out of some ten acres of ground. He could never save enough to buy himself a horse or tractor, so the work of clearing and cultivating and hauling in wood in winter was the job of Bernard...slow, lazy, stubborn. Timothy cursed the ox...get down on his knees and plead with him...cries...told the ox...how he hated to live...how terrible was the work that had to be done each day. Timothy and the ox...hated...also needed each other so they could carry on living.[39]

In Ryga's poems, novels and plays, the experience of dirt farmers, itinerant workers or manual laborers is all the same: oppressive poverty and the feeling of hopelessness. Ryga's novels became primarily an attempt to come to grips with the agony of his own past on the land, when years of drought reduced sections of the prairies into the most inhospitable land in the world. His early poems contain references that he later expanded into novels and plays. A poem about "the song of the stone pickers"[40] is made the subject of the novel, Ballad Of A Stonepicker; another poem describes barefoot Indian children standing beside "a shrieking train"[41] later used in The Ecstasy Of Rita Joe, when Jamie Paul dies under the wheels of a train. The various themes had their beginnings in the novels and were later expanded and served as stepping stones for his plays. There is a consistency in Ryga's themes throughout his writing. The struggle for survival in the country is presented as preferable to the materialistic life in the city. The flashback device used in the novel, Ballad Of A Stonepicker, is gradually refined in his plays until he acquired his unique form of liquid dramaturgy that enabled his characters to move freely between past and present, reality and imagination. As Ryga progressed from novels to plays, he added music, writing lyrics for many of his songs, meticulously picking them out on his banjo. The songs developed from simple background music to creating mood or complementing the emotions of his characters. Ryga, in all his writing, empathized with those less fortunate.

George Ryga died from stomach cancer 19 November 1987. Ryga, a talented man, saw literature as a means to serve mankind. He believed that literature should be an accurate description of the human condition. His work is a model on which future authors hopefully will build, working towards a brighter future for suffering humanity.

Notes

Chapter One

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[3] Hay, "Beginnings" 39. (Ryga quoted)

[4] Hay, "Beginnings" 49. (Ryga quoted)

[5] Hay, "Beginnings" 40. (Ryga quoted)

[6] Don Hunter, "George Ryga: Canadian Success Story," Vancouver Province 12 Jan. 1971: E15. (U.C. Archives)

[7] Mark Gerson, "The International Acceptance Of Playwright George Ryga," Performing Arts In Canada, ed. Barbara Roscoe, Vol. 19, #3 (Toronto: Canadian Stage and Arts, 1982) 45.

[8] David Watson, "Political Mythologies, An Interview With George Ryga," Canadian Drama, ed. Eugene P. Benson, Vol. 8, #2 (Guelph: U. of Guelph, 1982) 162.

[9] Watson 163.

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[11] Hay, "Beginnings" 12. (Ryga quoted)

[12] Hay, "Beginnings" 40. (Ryga quoted)

[13] Nancy Thompson, letter to the author (1988)

[14] Herbert Whittaker, "Ryga The Stormy Playwright Is Great With Green Thumb Too," Globe and Mail, (Toronto) 11 June 1973: E29.

[15] Hunter, "Success Story" 15.

[16] Jerry Shack, "George Ryga, Poet, Playwright, Novelist," Interview Ukrainian Canadian, (Toronto) June 1969: 34+.

[17] Hunter, "Success Story" 15.

[18] Shack 35.

[19] Shack 35.

[20] Hay, "Beginnings" 41. (Ryga quoted)

[21] Hay, "Beginnings" 42.

[22] Hay, "Beginnings" 42.

[23] Shack 36.

[24] Hay, "Beginnings" 42.

[25] Hay, "Beginnings" 42. (Ryga quoted)

[26] Innes, "Politics" 21.

[27] Innes, "Politics" 15. (Ryga quoted)

[28] Hay, "Beginnings" 44. (Ryga quoted)

[29] Heather Persons, "All Work And No Play Hasn't Made George A Dull Boy," Maclean's, (Toronto: Maclean-Hunter, 1976) 63.

[30] Hay, "Beginnings" 44. (Ryga quoted)

[31] Watson 162.

[32] Shack 36+.

[33] George Ryga, Song Of My Hands And Other Poems (Edmonton: National, 1956) n. pag. (U.C. Archives)

[34] Innes, "Politics" 20.

[35] Whittaker, "Stormy Playwright" 29.

[36] Norma Ryga, personal interview, 28, 29 April, 1989.

[37] Allen Garr, "Footlights On The Foothills," Vancouver Sun 13 Nov. 1976: Weekend Magazine 10+.

[38] Shack 37.

[39] Shack 37.

[40] Shack 37.

[41] C.B.C. Times Oct. 1963: n. pag. (U.C. Archives)

[42] Shack 37.

[43] George Ryga, "Memories and Some Lessons Learned," Canadian Theatre Review, #36 (Downsview: York University, 1982) 42.

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[45] Watson 163.

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[48] Mavor Moore, "George Ryga," Four Canadian Playwrights (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973) 69.

[49] Roy Starrs, "Ryga On Grass And Wild Strawberries," Vancouver Province 3 April 1969: Drama 3.

[50] R. Lynn Shervill, "Ryga," Centre Meter, (Banff) 17 June 1972: 2. (U.C. Archives) (Ryga quoted)

[51] Watson 167.

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Epilogue

In the summer of 1987, George Ryga received an invitation to present a poem at the Merbad Poetical Festival in Baghdad, Iraq, scheduled for 24 November through 1 December 1987. This festival revived an ancient custom, an annual gathering of Arab scholars to recite their poetry in the open air for audiences from the Arab world. The new Merbad Festival, then in its eighth year, had as its focus the struggle of mankind for peace and justice. Poets and scholars from more than fifty countries around the world came to Baghdad to participate in this festival.

In response to this invitation, George Ryga wrote his last work. His poem, titled "Resurrection", was read at the Baghdad festival by a friend. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of Norma Ryga, a gift presented to the author on 29 April 1989.

RESURRECTION

The long sleep ends in spinning shards of light
Arching through the sky like tracers
Fired from sacred armaments beyond horizons
Of this earth.
Such lovely colors now flare with bursts
Of red rage -- of cool violets and blues --
The joy of gold and green lighting the canyons
And crevises of stone. Lighting ribbons
Of moving steel which bind continents
In abundance of cereals and fruits,
Bunker oil and machines to further cut
And peel the granite layers of earth's skin..
Another distant crash and myriads of stars
Rise among the tracers, crystals of rare gems
In the finery of ribboned colors
Of the rainbow. And on a hill
Where dead men rest the long night
Of eternity, one rises to his elbow,
Then his knee. Dim eyes turned skywards
And parched lips quivering for a word
To greet the changing time. He sways
As rising cosmic winds with shrill sounds
Begin to bend and weave the colored threads
Of heaven in an ever-changing tapestry.
And in the restless play of image and of light
Momentary ghosts of time slip by
To vanish in a turning, pulsing sweep
Of fresh stars and streamers from the cold
And restless reservoirs of space.
He rises to his knees and sees
Faint tracings form and vanish of times
Gone or still to come -- great horses
Pawing wind and cloud with faceless
Armored warriors on their backs swallowed
By a wall of flame which vanished with
The vanished horsemen. A cathedral in the sun
And chime of bells announcing harvest
Or approaching war -- great northern rivers
Carrying ice to distant seas. Darkened fields
Of people running, stumbling from destruction,
Food and tools bundled on their backs.
Another wash of turning light and lovers
Can be seen beside a garden wall, transfixed
In time through chemistry and soul.
Children in a tree of children, pulling
Swollen plums from drooping limbs to nourish
Cries of laughter in the green and languid leaves.
A horse-drawn wagon with a load of summer hay
And a young boy sleeping in its shadow, straw hat

Covering his face and horses sleeping where they stood.
He points from his knees to the fading image
And hoarsely shouts -- "That's me! That's me!
As I once was!"
Long forgotten tears now burn his eyes
And he drops his head, overcome by his own
Inner visions of a childhood spent with women gossips,
Men smelling of the barnyard and the field --
Of children like himself learning to cut woods,
Turn cereals to bread, mend shoes, mid-wife
Cows giving birth to calves in breach.
Love and death as constant as the changing seasons --
Enemies and friends alike worried for each other,
Shared each other's triumphs and sad times;
Animals and poultry each with names like Susie,
John and Paul -- cared for with tenderness
And only the most loved slaughtered gently
And then fed family and guests for the most important
Dinner of the year. All faith was simple --
God was a garish painting in the country church --
God was water in the deep and icy well --
God was a patch of good dark soil, or a stroke
Of luck in purchase of a needed horse.
God was a light of mystery and joy in eyes
Of a girl retreating into womanhood, beckoning
For him to follow. God was darkness
Gathering light...
He lifts his face towards the firmament again
Refreshed and grateful for an end to lying prone
On the stony hill of those neglected
And the dead -- a human refuse heap that would not
Decompose or turn to dust. The fallen ones
Of whom no one spoke. Victims of unexpected turns
In history and ways of living.
These living dead, condemned with blighted hopes
And poverty to purgatory and despair
Which embittered everything -- the food they ate,
The homes they could not pay for -- bright flowers
In their window boxes which belied deep melancholia
Behind the windows of the house. Children
With half a chance at entry to the throbbing world
Of computors, commerce, politics and art --
Dulled by drugs, ignorance and fear of life
In the onrush of urbanized forests, fields
Beyond forgotten hamlets
Where the mayor and the village fool
Would meet as equals, for one could read --
The other shovelled snow in times of need.
He lifts his face toward the firmament again
To see volcanoes, storms, great fires mirrored
In the heavens, but only briefly, for the roiling
Lights and shadows gave further birth to images

Of times earth remembered. Beasts small and great --
Birds with jaws of dogs -- reptiles and armored fish --
And man, crouching at the roots of mighty grass trees,
Avoiding dangers of quick death for food. Content
With grubs and lizards, he avoids the fang and claw
Reaching for him. But he observes, and ponders.
He ponders and observes..
Rivers boil and rage and then subside. Huge fires
Flare as burning forests, pillaged cities, encampments
Of mighty armies of the centuries creating warmth
And food, then vanish in swirling vapors that cloud heaven
In forbidding darkness that chill him as he watches,
Wondering why it is his fortune to be witness
To the memories of earth.
He has not done enough to match the imagery
Of ancient horsemen in the clouds, their angry gazes
Set on conquest of other lands and peoples --
Followed by the solemn priesthood of magnificent religions
Sowing deeper seeds in earth made fertile
With blood of war and ashes of scorched forests.
Groups of survivors passed in shadows, heads bowed
In weariness and hunger. Fiddlers and dancing players
Garish in their masks followed pain with lively
Pantomimes of triumph over darkness and despair,
Their throbbing sound of hope lifting up his spirit
As he craned his neck peering into clouds which had
Devoured their image and their memory.
He has not done enough -- the words burn his lips
And as he squints upwards, searching for the vanished
Spectres in the turbulence of sky rebuilding order
Out of chaos and eternal revolution of stars.
I have not done enough!
The cry now leaves his mouth
And in his inner eye he sees the reason
For his stricken state -- his purgatory of the spirit
And dreadful fall from grace for which the fault
Was his -- all his. Between the summer mowing of the hay
In boyhood and the climb up the hill to join the dead ones
So many seasons later, the world had fed and sheltered
His family and him. In return, this same earth asked
For his outrage at Hiroshima -- incinerated
On a bright summer morning -- Or a cry for Chile
Where the flames of freedom faltered
In a rush of bandits -- The torment of Soweto
.. The fascist slaughter in Shatilla.
I have not done enough, he moaned and staggered
To his feet. Frost now fell from the stilled
Heavens and he shuddered in his rags.
Nearby, another body stirred, then fell face down
Into the earth. He was alone, chilling quickly
In the icy night of frozen stars and desolated earth
Whose memory now paused, waiting for a sign

Of recognition from these damaged gods who failed
In obligations for their lives of pain and splendor.
Then -- drawing a fierce breath, his heart ignited
With a long-forgotten fire. Brighter and brighter
It flared, glowing through his skin and clothes.
He cried through parched lips -- "Yes -- I am free,
Free, free at last! I will go where I am needed.
Tend the sick and wounded -- give courage to the fallen..."
Spirit now and weightless, he rose into the darkness
On wings he could not see, hovered for a moment,
Relishing the icy chill washing at his fever,
Then turned and vanished eastward, to meet
The rising sun. Racing now to meet the dawn --
To join the tragedies and triumphs to come.

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George Ryga
September, 1987